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# A Step into The Past

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Book 23

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Huang Yi

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## Chapter 01

### She's Married

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Xiang Shaolong's mind entered a psychic realm and became as still as water. His footsteps developed into a regular momentum, as if he is marching to an invisible rhythm. Concurrently, he can accurately sense the speed and distance of his approaching attacker.

Ever since he travelled to this period of the Warring States via the time machine, not a single day goes by without him using a weapon to some extent. As a result, he is acutely familiar with the different types of weapons in this era. Focusing on his hearing abilities, he instantly rejected his earlier hypothesis that his assailant is using a spear. Instead, he concluded that the enemy is wielding a long halberd.

A halberd is a combination weapon, as it can be used to stab like a spear or slash like a sabre. It is a piercing weapon that also allows for a hook attack. Thus, the swishing sound of the weapon is obviously unlike that of a spear.

Xiang Shaolong is dying to turn around and have a look but acknowledges that if he does that, he would fail to deploy his strategy of unpredictability. Moreover, it will only irk his opponent to increase his speed in a fierce assault.

A strong gust of wind came blowing and Xiang Shaolong nearly had to close his eyes because of the snow and rain peppering his face

The resonating of the halberd became muffled against the noisy wind.

Presently, the rider is about seven metres behind him. If the assassin chooses to utilize his full strength, his crushing blow will land on Xiang Shaolong in the blink of an eye.

Out of the blue, like the sound of lightning striking the ground from behind, a voice reverberated: “Shen Liang, prepare to meet your maker!”

Xiang Shaolong instantaneously closed his eyes and took a step to his right, standing in the lane meant for horses and carriages. His right hand released its grip on the sword handle as his left hand simultaneously drew out his sword.

All along, he has been walking slowly on the pavement to the left and was clutching his sword with his right hand. Any potential aggressor attacking from the back would expect him to shift to the left side, increasing the distance between the two of them and using his right hand to draw out his sword to parry any incoming blows. Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong chose to do the exact opposite, stepping to his right onto the vehicle lane, resulting in the enemy’s long halberd stabbing in the wrong direction.

A miss is as good as a mile.

Furthermore, this is a life and death situation.

The man cried out in surprise and tried to alter the direction of the attack but it was too late.

Without turning his head back, Xiang Shaolong used a backhand move and stabbed the backside of the horse as it dashed past him.

The warhorse whinnied in pain and wildly sprinted ahead, nearly throwing the rider off.

Watching the single assailant disappear into the snow and rain as if he is running for his life, Xiang Shaolong was greatly humoured.

Winning this battle appears to be easy on the surface but it requires courage, critical timing and perfect coordination between body movement and footwork.

The sudden gust of wind and snow is a blessing in disguise.

Although Xiang Shaolong himself is slightly blinded, his opponent who is riding against the wind would feel a much greater impact. Otherwise, it would be much more challenging for Xiang Shaolong to execute this strategy.

Returning his sword to its sheath, Xiang Shaolong tunneled through a horizontal alley and walked briskly for quite a distance in the direction towards Xie Residence. He got to his destination within an hour.

Reporting his name to the family warriors guarding the front gate, he was led into the property and told to wait at the external sitting room.

The serving maids were bearing strange expressions on their faces as they scrutinized him and whispered among themselves as if he is an eccentric

creature who came out of nowhere.

Under their direct stares, Xiang Shaolong was feeling out of place when Xie Ziyuan suddenly appeared with an ashen face. After dismissing the servants, he sat down beside him and uttered in a soft voice: "This time round, we have picked a bad timing. Someone has reported to my wife about my visit to the brothel last night. She just threw a tantrum and nearly laid her hand on me. Brother Shen, you must leave while you can. She would not believe our words right now."

Xiang Shaolong was sympathetic: "In this case, I will look for Brother Xie two days later."

Pulling him to his feet, Xie Ziyuan hurried: "Quickly!"

As the two men hastily walked towards the main gate, a shrill voice screeched from behind: "Where do you think you are going!"

Xie Ziyuan's entire body shook once and he froze on the spot as if his acupoints has been blocked

Filled with disbelief, Xiang Shaolong was badly shaken as well and was stunned on the spot.

Accompanied by the sound of her tinkering accessories, Xie Ziyuan's shrew wife came to the back of both men and coldly laughed: "Where are you going? Do you think I am in the dark about the conspiracy between the two of you?"

She shrieked: “Xie Quan, come here you 1diot. I want you to tell me everything that happened last night. EVERYTHING. I guarantee that nothing will happen to you.”

Xie Ziyuan felt like he was struck by lightning for even the last servant loyal to himself has switched sides.

Xie Quan suddenly appeared and kneeled down, confessing in a quivering voice: “Young Master! Your servant was forced to betray you.”

Turning around like robot, Xie Ziyuan looked as if he is going to burst out crying. He declared: “This is wholly my idea and has nothing to do with Brother Shen.”

With his back still facing Xie Ziyuan’s wife, Xiang Shaolong’s heart is intertwined in countless knots, for he recognized the voice of Xie Ziyuan’s wife to be Shan Rou whom he once deeply love.

She has finally given up her dream of leading a wandering lifestyle, returning back to her roots, becoming the Mistress of the Xie household and even giving birth to two sons.

His only wish right now is to leave the Xie Residence without looking back so that Shan Rou would never know that he did came by.

He could instinctively understand why Xie Ziyuan loved her and feared her simultaneously. Frankly speaking, that is the ‘kick’ Shan Rou gives to men.

Until today, he has fond memories of his dalliances with Shan Rou.

He is touched at Xie Ziyuan's gesture of 'brotherhood loyalty' for shouldering all the blame upon himself.

His mind wanted to leave but he could not lift his foot to take a single step.

Turning his attention to Xiang Shaolong, Shan Rou scolded: "You are named Shen Liang right? You look so tall and muscular but you are acting like a coward. Do you lack the guts to turn around and face me?"

The crowd of servants began giggling among themselves

Xiang Shaolong calmly pleaded: "Would Mistress Xie please invite everyone else to leave the hall? Shen Liang (I) would like to talk to you privately on behalf of Brother Xie."

Xie Ziyuan swiftly interrupted: "This matter does not concern Brother Shen. Dear wifey, can you let Brother Shen go? If you want to punish someone, let me be the one."

To everyone's astonishment, Shan Rou turned speechless and was fixated on the spot as if her acupoints are blocked.

Xiang Shaolong can feel Shan Rou's piercing gaze on his back and his heart is filled with an indescribable feeling.

As everyone present is in a state of bewilderment, Shan Rou commanded:

“Everyone get the hell out of here.”

Xie Ziyuan was traumatized: “Does hubby (I) have to leave too?”

Shan Rou shouted: “Hubby my @rse, you better be the first to scram!”

In a split second, everyone has cleanly left, leaving only the two of them in the spacious hall.

Shan Rou’s excited and fast breathing can be heard from behind as Xiang Shaolong gradually turned his body around. As the four eyes exchanged glances, both parties shuddered as if they were being electrocuted. Shan Rou has put on some weight but is far more enchanting than before.

Shan Rou took two steps towards him and stopped, excruciatingly trying to suppress the urge to throw herself into Xiang Shaolong’s arms.

Xiang Shaolong felt as if his throat is entangled. He has so many things to tell her but did not know where to start. Ultimately, he let out a long sigh, shaking his head with a bitter smile and strode towards the main door.

Shan Rou tried to catch up by taking two steps forward, softly calling: “Shaolong!”

Over ten pairs of eyes are now focused at him. Regardless whether they are servants or family warriors, every single person’s mouth is wide open with surprise that Xiang Shaolong managed to come out of the hall unscathed and with his clothes in a tidy manner.

Xie Ziyuan extracted himself from the crowd and put his hand around Xiang Shaolong's shoulder as he led him towards the main gate. "What did Brother Shen tell her?" He asked excitedly.

Xiang Shaolong spouted nonsense: "Sister in law (polite way to address) is domineering to some extent but she can be quite understanding if you talk to her nicely. I explained to her the simile: The more she oppresses you, the more resistance she can expect in return. For example, if she allows Brother Xie to fool around, I guarantee Brother Xie will grow tired of it after some time."

Xie Ziyuan wondered: "Why would I grow tired of fooling around? What is her reaction?"

Xiang Shaolong lied: "She says she wants to think it over."

Xie Ziyuan was overjoyed: "It is a miraculous 180 degrees turn! Can Brother Shen stay and accompany me for a chat?"

Right now, Xiang Shaolong is feeling depressed as if his intestines are all entangled together. Therefore he is certainly not in the mood for idle chatter. He intentionally threatened: "The first thing you should do now is to obediently spend more time accompanying Sister in Law. Otherwise, she may have the impression that you are still up to no good and would not even consider letting you fool around."

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck and hastily withdrew his hand from Xiang Shaolong's arm. His expression is priceless.

Waving his goodbye, Xiang Shaolong walked to the main road. The sky is filled with falling rain and snow.

He felt lost.

Ever since he came to Lin Zi, he has been trying ways and means to locate Shan Rou. He did not anticipate meeting her under such circumstances and moreover, she is the wife of another man.

Xie Ziyuan should be a good husband. Aye!

In the past, when Mei Canniang got married to another man, he did not undergo any emotional turmoil, as their love has no depth.

But he did love Shan Rou intensely.

He respects Shan Rou's decision. Furthermore, he himself has a fulfilling marriage and a complete family. The only issue is he is now far away in Qi, a foreign territory, and it is easy for feelings of loneliness and the desire for companionship to arise. As a result, he is feeling disheartened as he could not continue his previous relationship with Shan Rou.

As the wind and snow assault his face in a cold and hurting manner, he felt as if he had just woken up from a dream.

After heaving another breath, Xiang Shaolong started making his way back to his accommodation.

Let bygones be bygones!

He sincerely wished Shan Rou happiness and is relieved that she has given up her plan for revenge.

Back at the guesthouse, Xiao Yuetan has been waiting for him for some time. Observing his early return, he was astonished: "I heard your men saying that you would be back late in the night and was about to take my leave. Eek. Why are you wearing such an ugly expression on your face?"

Pulling Xiao Yuetan into his room and after they both sat down, Xiang Shaolong began: "You should have heard of Shan Rou, right? She is (Zhao Zhi) Zhi Zhi's blood sister and we used to be lovers. She is presently married to Xie Ziyuan."

Xiao Yuetan was stupefied: "Another coincidence!"

Not wishing to dwell on this matter, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic and enquired about Zou Yan. With a puzzled expression, Xiao Yuetan revealed: "Grandmaster Zou has wandered off looking for a suitable burial plot for himself. He hasn't been home for several days."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart throbbing with pain and did not know what to reply to that.

Xiao Yuetan lowered his voice: "Lu Buwei has arrived this afternoon by ship. He is accompanied by Han Jie and Xu Shang."

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: “Isn’t Han Jie working for Lao Ai?”

Xiao Yuetan articulated: “From this gesture, we can conclude that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are in cahoots with each other. Han Jie is one of the four top disciples of Qixia Sword Saint. With him paving the way, the swordsmen of Qixia may align themselves with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. This could potentially tip the balance in power.”

Pausing for a while, he continued: “Based on Lu Buwei’s method of scheming, he would definitely try to give the King of Qi the impression that appointing Tian Jian as the next Crown Prince will be detrimental to the relationship between Qin and Qi. If Cao Cuidao were to side with First Prince Tian Sheng and Tian Dan, it would not be unexpected if Tian Jian is the loser in this power tussle.”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered: “Whoever wins or lose is Qi’s internal affairs. My utmost concern is how to assist these beauties of the Song & Dance Troupe to realize their dreams. Lu Buwei can do whatever he wants to.”

Xiao Yuetan was taken aback: “It is indeed rare to see Shaolong so despondent. Don’t you find any meaning in tripping Lu Buwei up? Please have a good night’s rest, for you may change your mindset when you wake up tomorrow.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Unless I can reappear as Xiang Shaolong, otherwise, it would be impossible to exert influence over the King of Qi. But if I do so, it would be openly inviting Lu Buwei to scheme against myself. Oh! I

forgot to tell you. Both Li Yuan and Lord Longyang have seen through my disguise.”

Xiao Yuetan speedily pressed for details and after Xiang Shaolong finished telling his story, Xiao Yuetan gleefully cheered: “In this case, the situation is far from bleak. For the time being, the greatest fear of Qi is an alliance between Chu and the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), suppressing their ambitions towards Yan. As long as Tian Dan do not directly confront you, our job would be much easier!”

Xiang Shaolong was in a dilemma: “Whenever there are gains, some losses would inevitable be incurred. As Xiang Shaolong, Lu Buwei, Tian Dan or even Guo Kai would start to plot against me. If I continue to masquerade as Shen Liang, I would have to contend against the likes of Zongsun Long as well as the swordsmen of Qi. I am stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

The sound of knocking can be heard. It turned out to be Little Ping’er who is here on Feng Fei’s orders, inviting Xiang Shaolong for a meeting. After Xiao Yuetan whispered ‘see you tomorrow’ and took his leave, Xiang Shaolong followed Little Ping’er to see Feng Fei.

Feng Fei is playing a zither on the second storey of the main block with full concentration, filling the air with subtle, divine music as if it came from the nine heavens itself. Until Xiang Shaolong sat down opposite her, she did not show any signs of knowing that he has arrived.

After Little Ping’er excused herself to the lower floor, Xiang Shaolong half-slouched, half-sat on a soft cushion, feasting his eyes on this beauty’s

attractiveness and immersing himself in the celestial music. His disenchantment over Shan Rou decreased by about 30%.

Strumming the zither strings, Feng Fei let loose another series of melodies before stopping in an instant. Lifting her pretty head to meet his gaze, she quizzed with her eyes shining: “Does Mister Shen recognise this part?”

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze and shook his head in a flabbergasted manner.

Feng Fei sweetly chirped: “This is a combination of melodies I extracted and edited from snippets of your songs. You ah! How can you miss it?”

Xiang Shaolong awkwardly scratched his head: “I really cannot distinguish my songs from your melodies. Why is this so?”

Feng Fei gently cooed: “I obviously cannot religiously follow your original tune. After several modifications, this is the final outcome! Do you like it?”

This is the first time Feng Fei is cajoling Xiang Shaolong, surprising him. He praised: “Mistress is truly talented. Have you assign new song tunes for the Birthday routine?”

Her lovely eyes gazing at the snowy night outside her window, Feng Fei sighed: “Do you know I just realized that it has been snowing heavily outside? After listening to your bizarre tunes, Feng Fei (I) felt as if I am possessed, churning out one new song after another. It is unbelievably easy.”

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic: “My heartiest congratulations to Mistress.”

Shifting her gaze back his face, she sharpened her stare and mused: “What kind of man are you, seriously?”

Xiang Shaolong snorted: “I have arms, legs, eyes, ears, a mouth and a nose, just like everybody else.”

Feng Fei observed: “But in my eyes, you are like an immortal from heaven, coming down to earth to help those in need. Aye! If immortals truly exist, that would be so wonderful. There are too many frustrating issues plaguing humans. Sometimes, I would even hate myself.”

After some contemplation, Xiang Shaolong nodded: “It is true that certain things in life are rather annoying but in the eyes of many others, Mistress is regarded as an unreachable sacred being, light years away from themselves. Being able fall beneath your skirt is already an unmatched honour.”

Feng Fei shifted her body to lean on a cushion, giggling: “Your descriptive proverbs are really weird. What is ‘unreachable sacred being, light years, fall beneath my skirt’? Aye! Feng Fei is only an ordinary person too. I only feel superior to others when it comes to creating music and performing.”

Following her statement, she glanced at him with her starry eyes and pleaded: “Would you please stay for the night and accompany me for a night of chit-chatting? Every time I have a new composition, I would have difficulty sleeping and moreover, I usually lack a friend I can confide in.”

Xiang Shaolong had quite a scare at her suggestion and he warily cautioned: “Ultimately, I am a lowly servant. Wouldn’t it invite rumours if I spend the

night in Mistress's bedroom?"

Feng Fei grumbled: "Where was the same display of courage two nights ago? If it was another man in your shoes under the present circumstances, he would not leave even if I try to chase him out."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Ever since I know that Mistress's secret admirer is Xiang Shaolong, I have become more and more jittery. In the near future when we arrive at Xianyang and if he learns that I did spend a night in Mistress's bedroom, even if nothing happened between us, my life would be in jeopardy. Mistress, do you agree with me?"

Feng Fei was speechless and did not know how to reply to that.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. This is called: Using your words against yourself. It is indeed preposterous to use her 'Xiang Shaolong' to suppress himself, the authentic 'Xiang Shaolong'.

After some time, Feng Fei lamented: "All along, I have the impression that men are fearless when it concerns matters of the fairer sex. Why are you such a bold character on other issues but is acting like a coward in this field."

Pretending to be surprised, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "Judging from the tone of Mistress, it seems like we would be doing much more than idle chatter by the candlelight."

With a girly chortle 'Pu Ci', Feng Fei enticingly batted her eyes at him, cheerfully stating: "Talking to you is so meaningful. For the longest time, only

I, Feng Fei, get to tease other men. To think that now, you are the one teasing me instead. Bring it on!”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Bring what on?”

Feng Fei’s mouth curled up seductively and suggested: “My dear manager, please help me take off my shoes first? ”

Xiang Shaolong glanced at her for a short spell and whispered: “Mistress, are you serious about this? Once we start the ball rolling it would be difficult to stop. By then, it would be impossible even if Mistress wants to back out.”

He is not kidding. With a beautiful disposition to match Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, together with her strong intention to seduce, even a meditating monk would be tempted by her, not to mention him, Xiang Shaolong.

Out of the blue, the wind and snow outside, coupled with the lantern-covered candle light, on top of the warm feeling from the burning firepot strengthened the already romantic and inviting atmosphere in the room by several times.

Scanning her blossoming beauty, refined brows, seducing aura, protruding breasts and slender waists, the temptation is simply irresistible.

Feng Fei shot him a look, clarifying: “Manager Shen is thinking too much. Before climbing onto my bed and going to sleep, I would need to take off my shoes first. Since Little Ping’er is not around, I shall have to trouble you instead!”

Xiang Shaolong was so angry he nearly burst his arteries. Gnashing his teeth, he shifted forward, using his hand to support her right foot.

Feng Fei let out a surprise wail, frowning: “Manager Shen, can you please be more gentle?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own breathing quickening. Using his left hand to support her foot, his right hand slithered north, softly caressing her flawless calf, sighing: “A shining example of: as smooth and white as jade.”

Feng Fei’s body shuddered in response to his touch. Closing her eyes halfway, she lightly approved: “As long as your hand do not move any further up, I don’t mind letting you take advantage of me like this. Take it that I am rewarding you for helping me solve this problem.”

Xiang Shaolong was infuriated: “Judging from Mistress’s words, are you instigating me to progress further?” As he spoke, he vulgarly shifted his hand further up her leg.

As Feng Fei felt Xiang Shaolong’s hand slide past her kneecaps, exploring her out-of-bounds thigh, she let out a squeal and pressed down his hand underneath the fabric of her dress.

Xiang Shaolong withdrew his hand in a flash and gingerly took off her two cotton shoes with an official expression. He then proceeded to massage her feet, causing Feng Fei’s body to turn into jelly and her pupils began to dilate.

In one swift movement, Xiang Shaolong lifted her in his arms and strode towards her bedroom.

Feng Fei tightly embraced his neck, fragrantly puffing beside his ear, hissing: “You are going to land Feng Fei in hot soup!”

Xiang Shaolong was confused: “How is that possible?”

Feng Fei protested: “If you make me fall in love with you, wouldn’t that land me in hot soup?”

Xiang Shaolong came to his senses and secretly gave thanks for this close shave. He should not have a physical relationship with this beauty whose heart belonged to another man. Otherwise, it would only complicate matters and result in unbearable consequences.

After tucking her in, Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and gave her a kiss on the lips before warmly reassuring: “Mistress can put your mind at ease! Whenever I remind myself you are Xiang Shaolong’s woman, even if I have ten times more guts, I would not dare to lay a finger on you.”

After speaking, he quickly left as if he is running for his life.

## Chapter 02

### Unfinished Love

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Just as he left Feng Fei's bedroom, he was intercepted by a subordinate who made the following report: Zhang Quan was ambushed outside the Villa, suffering heavy injuries and is barely alive.

Although Xiang Shaolong knows that Xiao Yuetan is behind this incident, he cannot choose not to attend to him. Outside Zhang Quan's room, he ran into his (Zhang Quan) trusted follower Kun Shan. This scoundrel was enraged: "It must be the doing of Zongsun Long. Lin Zi is a lawless place, full of outrageous hooligans calling the shots."

Xiang Shaolong is secretly glad that they are mistaken, saving him the trouble to mislead them. He questioned in a low voice: "How are his injuries?"

Kun Shan responded: "He received a few punches to his head and face. Now, his eyes are puffy and he can barely see while the corner of his lips is bruised and bleeding. It is upsetting to see him in such a condition."

Completing his answer, he walked away, sighing.

Stepping into the room, Xiang Shaolong was amazed to see Dong Shuzen and two maids tending to Zhang Quan's wounds.

As per Kun Shan's description, Zhang Quan's head is swollen like a pig's head.

It would be impossible for him to face the public in the near future.

This is the vicious strategy employed by Xiao Yuetan, intentionally causing Zhang Quan to lose his usefulness to Lu Buwei, indirectly forcing Lu Buwei to rely on Xiang Shaolong instead.

Sitting by Zhang Quan's bedside, Dong Shuzen gave Xiang Shaolong a sad look and sighed: "These people are really ruthless. Look! They have beaten Assistant Manager to such a sorry state."

Zhang Quan groaned: "Is it Brother Shen?"

Recalling the fact that this gorgeous Dong Shuzen did spend a few nights with this ruffian, Xiang Shaolong's heart is brimming with hatred. He faced Dong Shuzen and demanded in an uncouth manner: "All of you need to leave the room for a while. I need to talk to Brother Zhang."

An annoyed Dong Shuzen frowned with her brows knitted together. After dismissing her two maids, she firmly insisted: "What secrets are there that Shuzen has to be kept in the dark about?"

With much difficulty, Zhang Quan begged: "Second Mistress, please excuse yourself for a short while."

Dong Shuzen was taken aback and left unhappily.

It is now Xiang Shaolong's turn to take Dong Shuzen's seat. Lowering his head, he asked in a soft voice: "Brother Zhang, how are you doing?"

His mouth swollen like a pig's lips, Zhang Quan can only mumble his words vaguely: "My body is fine as they only hit my head, forcing me to tell them why did I visit my employer. Of course I refused to tell them anything. Aye! My biggest loss is the sum of money from my employer, which they robbed! The money is actually meant for you."

This clearly demonstrates the brilliance of Xiao Yuetan's stratagem. Not only did Zhang Quan fail to come up with the money to bribe Xiang Shaolong, he cannot go back to see Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong probed: "Who did Brother Zhang went to visit?"

Zhang Quan cautioned: "I cannot tell you yet. Aye! I did not anticipate Zongsun Long's involvement. Presently, every one of our Troupe member is placed under close supervision by his cronies."

Xiang Shaolong is not in mood to chat further and stood up, advising: "Brother Zhang, please have a good rest!"

Pulling his sleeve to restrain him, Zhang Quan anxiously beseeched: "No matter what, you must help me. I will definitely get the money for you as soon as possible."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "What can I do for Brother Zhang?"

Zhang Quan briefed: "Try to become Feng Fei's confidante and find out what is the relationship between Lord Longyang and herself."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "If you were Feng Fei and I am now your

confidante, would you tell me your life-changing secrets?”

Zhang Quan replied after much agony: “Feng Fei trusts no one but herself, and that includes Lord Longyang. Moreover, the King of Wei harbours designs on Feng Fei so at the end of the day, she can only rely on you. Do you understand?”

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily shaken before he nodded: “Fine! I shall see what I can do about it. But until I receive my money, Brother Zhang can forget about my collaboration.”

Pushing his hand away, he walked out of the room all by himself.

Dong Shuzen was waiting by the door and saw him leaving the room. Dragging him to a pavilion in the garden, she lamented: “Are you still upset with me?”

Xiang Shaolong denied: “Your lowly servant dare not. No matter how Second Mistress tries to scam me or distrusts me, I, a lowly manager, can only submissively follow your commands.”

With a ‘Pu Ci’, Dong Shuzen giggled: “Look at your angry countenance. Shuzen begs your pardon, ok? Aye! I really do not know how to gain your affections. Are you someone who prefer males and not females?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Is every acquaintance of Lord Longyang considered a gay man?”

Pressing her entire body onto Xiang Shaolong and using her exquisite hands

to entangle his neck, Dong Shuzhen smiled: “There is no use hiding it. Witnessing his coquettish expression when he stares at you and the excitement in his eyes, I am certain that you are his male lover. Unless you are not his partner, he would not react in such a fashion. Now, Shuzhen’s only hope is that besides men, you are also into women.”

Xiang Shaolong was stupefied, thinking that he has reached a dead end and he could never redeem himself from this wrongful grievance. Exerting some strength to give her butt a playful slap, he helplessly pleaded: “You can continue to evaluate me along those lines. Second Mistress, can you please release me back to my room for a rest?”

Dong Shuzhen exaggeratedly cried out in pain and gave him a bear hug. Biting his ear, she hinted: “If you are into other forms of deviant 5ex, Shuzhen is willing to play along.”

Xiang Shaolong grabbed her aromatic shoulders and pushed her slightly away before declaring in an official tone: “Your lowly servant has to pass up Second Mistress’s kind intentions. Nonetheless, there is something you still do not comprehend: Even if you and Xiuzhen do not sleep with me, I, Shen Liang, would make suitable arrangements for you two and no one will have to end up as a concubine or mistress of the rich and powerful. If there is any falsehood in my words, may I, Shen Liang, die a horrible death.”

Dong Shuzhen calmed down and hazily eyed him with suspicion for a while. She softly quizzed: “What is in it for you? Are you aware that one wrong move can result in death and disaster? If Feng Fei gets to know that you are out to spoil her plans, she will be the first to come after you.”

Xiang Shaolong swore: “You can label me a fool, an idiot or whatever you desire but I have committed myself to make this a reality. All I need is your full obedience and I will definitely come to a solution.”

Wriggling her body sensually, Dong Shuzen cajoled: “Are we not obedient?”

Xiang Shaolong counselled: “Your obedience has gone overboard and your obedience is not only limited to me but also towards Zhang Quan, Sa Li and whoever that is useful to you. This is not the obedience I am looking for. Please go back and give it some thought but time is not on your side. We must make our move immediately after the performance. If you miss the boat, do not blame me for not offering you salvation.”

Her entire body trembling, Dong Shuzen leaned into his bosom, flustering: “Shen Liang ah! I am at a complete loss after hearing your words! Can you please tell me clearly what plans do you have for Shuzen?”

Xiang Shaolong lovingly kissed her charming face and sincerely revealed: “If the two of you are still unwilling to place complete trust and share all your information with me, there is a limit to how much I can assist you. My plan is to promote you to become another famous courtesan to continue Feng Fei’s legacy, allowing her to retire peacefully and living the life she wants to live.”

A frightened Dong Shuzen pitifully reminded: “This would be an ideal arrangement but how is it possible? Feng Fei regards me as her enemy and would never give her consent. Even if she somehow agrees, it would require the approval of everyone in the troupe. This is an impossible task.”

Xiang Shaolong was full of conviction: "I will settle Feng Fei's side. But whether can you eventually become another famous courtesan comparable to Feng Fei will have to depend on your own abilities."

Dong Shuzhen was shocked: "What abilities?"

Xiang Shaolong articulated: "I will convince Feng Fei to allow you to play the role of the main character in one of the Song & Dance routines. As long as you do a good job, I can sing your praises in front of Lord Longyang and other influential figures, persuading them to invite you to perform at their official banquets. Ha! What do you think will happen next?"

Dong Shuzhen jolted once and suddenly moved away from him. With a pair of lovely eyes shining with never-seen-before brilliance, she pondered in a throbbing voice: "Can you really convince Feng Fei?"

Stretching his hand out and lifting her pretty head, Xiang Shaolong unconsciously gave her a deep kiss on her lips. Only until she started panting did he release her, promising: "Give me three days and I will get Feng Fei to give you her consent personally. However, Xiuzhen and you must give up all your devious plans. Right now, I need you to go to bed obediently."

Her body turning limp from his kissing and her pupils dilated, Dong Shuzhen pestered: "Can I spend the night with you? Shuzhen is feeling so horny from your provocation."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling desperate too, secretly cursing himself for stirring her flames of passion. Strengthening his will, he turned her sexy body around

and pushed her for ten over steps, reaching the corridor leading to her bedroom, laughing: “Didn’t you mentioned I am into males? Go and look for Xiuzhen and tell her about this good news! You must remember not to let a third person know about this plan; otherwise, it will not come true!”

Finishing, he quickly fled back to his room.

Before he could have his breakfast the next morning, a subordinate came to report that Xie Ziyuan is looking for him. Xiang Shaolong was alarmed, for his greatest fear is Shan Rou telling him about their relationship. If this was the case, it would be really awkward to see him.

Fortunately, Xie Ziyuan is still as friendly as ever when Xiang Shaolong came to meet him in the front sitting hall. After getting him to dismiss the serving maids, Xie Ziyuan excitedly expounded: “Brother Shen is superb. Not only did wifey not give me a hard time last night; she gave me permission to befriend you. She mentioned that with you looking after me, it is all right even if I go out and have a bit of fun. Ah! Brother Shen is truly my best friend and savior!”

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly, knowing that Shan Rou still harbour feelings for himself, resulting in this decision which made Xie Ziyuan deliriously happy.

“Brother Xie need not attend morning court today?” Xiang Shaolong was curious.

Xie Ziyuan answered: “Our great King caught a cold last night so today’s court

session has been adjourned. Hey! Is Brother Shen available tonight?"

Noticing that he is as joyful as a dog without a lease, Xiang Shaolong cautioned: "You better be careful for your significant other could be testing you."

Slapping his chest as a sign of guarantee, Xie Ziyuan swore: "My wifey is a woman of her words and will not lie to me. She wants to invite Brother Shen to our humble abode tonight for dinner before allowing us to go out and have fun, giving Little Brother (me) an opportunity to play a good host. Ha!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "You looked as if you can't wait for tonight."

Without the slightest trace of guilt, Xie Ziyuan validated: "Of course. Only when lying in the arms of an unknown lady and breathing in her womanly scent can my creative brain juices start flowing. Aye! You have no idea how much pressure the great King is exerting on me. If I do not come up with the lyrics for Soft Boned Beauty's congratulatory birthday song, I will be in hot soup."

Realizing the genuine motivation behind it all, Xiang Shaolong became agitated: "Over the past two days, did you attend Lan Gongyuan's rehearsal?"

With a pained expression, Xie Ziyuan grieved: "Without an excellent composition, I do not dare to face her. I ran into her lover Qi Yu in the palace yesterday and was at the receiving end of his sarcasms and insults. Fortunately, I was in a good mood or else I would teach him a lesson or two."

As if he suddenly recalled the matter, he rapidly enquired: "What is going on between you and Zongsun Long?"

After Xiang Shaolong cut the story short and explained the chain of events, Xie Ziyuan groaned: "This is bad. Yesterday, he sent someone to probe about our relationship. Not suspecting anything amiss, I truthfully mentioned that we are newly acquainted. Oh. I better speak with him personally. If he is still adamant, I will get the Second Prince to intervene. That will surely force him to yield."

Wanting to keep things simple, Xiang Shaolong assured: "It is not wise to blow up the matter and Brother Xie need not intercede. Even if things go out of hand, I will be able to handle it."

Xie Ziyuan was suspicious: "Does Brother Shen knows about Zongsun Long's incredible influence in Lin Zi? He is more powerful than a Marquis and now that he has suffered at the hands of Brother Shen, he would not give up his quest for revenge so easily."

Xiang Shaolong promised: "Relax! If I do require Brother Xie's assistance, I would not refrain from asking for it!"

Xie Ziyuan affirmed: "In the future, feel free to confide your problems in me. I have to rush back to my official ministry for work; shall I pick you up tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong has nothing to say about that and nodded his head in agreement.

As Xie Ziyuan rose with delight, out of a sudden, the sentry announced: "First Mistress is here!"

Xie Ziyuan had a big shock and welcomed her respectfully with Xiang Shaolong.

Clothed in an ordinary yellow dress adorned with white flowers and decked with a cotton singlet on the outside, Feng Fei lightly stepped into the hall, escorted by a bevy of maids. Xie Ziyuan's eyes started to glow at the sight of her elegance and captivating beauty.

After giving Xiang Shaolong a vicious glare, Feng Fei knitted her brows and frowned at Xie Ziyuan: "What is the matter with Official Xie? It is normal for someone to pass by without entering, but now that Official Xie has passed by and entered, you did not even say hi to Feng Fei? Is Feng Fei someone unworthy of Official's attention?"

Xie Ziyuan is justly worth his weight in gold; prostrating himself to the floor without a moment's hesitation, he narrated: "Miss Feng has wronged me! Ever since I first laid my eyes on Mistress during the palace banquet, my soul has been hooked away by Mistress's charisma. Only today did I finally reclaim my soul and thus, dare not pay another visit to Mistress." Feng Fei and the maids could not hold back their laughter.

Feeling like a child playing games, Xiang Shaolong put an arm over Xie Ziyuan's shoulder and used the other hand to cover his eyes, pushing him towards the main gate. Towards Feng Fei, he laughed: "Your servant (I) had better escort Official Xie out."

Feng Fei was laughing vigorously, causing Xiang Shaolong to quickly look away, afraid that he would lose his soul like Xie Ziyuan.

Pushing Xie Ziyuan out of the Villa, he removed his hand covering his eyes.

Xie Ziyuan exhaled a breath: "Such a pristine treasure, such a rare encounter. No wonder Zongsun Long is going all out to obtain her."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "Brother Xie is interested as well?"

Xie Ziyuan solemnly state: "You may not believe my words but every time I reached home, I would cleanly forget about all my external liaisons."

Xiang Shaolong was gratified and commended: "How wonderful. I finally got it! Brother Xie chose to fool around because it is your unique way of getting inspiration to compose music and write lyrics."

Xie Ziyuan sighed: "Only Brother Shen knows me."

After sending Xie Ziyuan off, Xiang Shaolong found Feng Fei waiting in the hall for him to have breakfast together, resembling a wife anticipating to serve her husband, sending chills down his spine.

Dismissing Xiao Ping'er, the beauty interrogated: "When you are around, Xie Ziyuan seems like a totally different person and appears to be in great spirits. Why is he looking for you?"

Xiang Shaolong intentionally hid the truth from her: "It is boys stuff. It is

better for Mistress to be unaware of it.”

Feng Fei loudly wailed: “You are becoming more and more insolent. Don’t you forget that I can be nasty too.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Please be appeased my Mistress. We are simply going to have some fun at a brothel tonight.”

Feng Fei was astounded: “Are all men born cheap and low-class? We have top rated beauties right here and yet you are paying money for those normal looking girls.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled: “Is Mistress implying that your servant (I) can kiss you any old how?”

Feng Fei was annoyed: “How dare you speak like this!”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused: “Mistress must not forget that it was you who said that you are being forced!”

Feng Fei was so angry she nearly wanted to box him but instead calmed herself down, sighing: “Looks like I am the one who has lost my soul to you. Whenever you want me to be happy, Feng Fei must be happy. When you want me to be angry, Feng Fei must be angry. Can you please tell Feng Fei once and for all, what do you want me to do?”

Xiang Shaolong gently remarked: “Of course I want to you obediently listen to my instructions, allowing me to accomplish my dream.”

Resuming her icy demeanor, Feng Fei stared at him for a second before softly asking: "Speak!"

In an official tone, Xiang Shaolong enunciated: "My dream is to allow everyone in this Troupe to realize their wishes and ambitions."

Feng Fei sighed: "I am beginning to believe your sincerity but my question is: What makes you think that you, Shen Liang, has the ability to achieve all these? It is not as simple as getting my consent for this issue involves several other parties."

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "The most crucial factor lies with Mistress's approval. I will take care of the other matters."

Feng Fei challenged: "All right! Take it that you have my consent. How are you going to deal with the likes of Han Chuang, Zongsun Long, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan?"

Xiang Shaolong was about to give his reply when a servant came to report that Han Chuang is here.

## Chapter 03

### Rectifying Misjudgments

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From afar, Han Chuang paid his respects to both of them: “My greetings to Miss Feng and Shen Liang!”

Xiang Shaolong instantly loosen up, knowing that Han Chuang came over after learning his whereabouts from Lord Longyang. Thus, he would be mentally prepared to see Xiang Shaolong here and not arouse further doubts about his identity.

Feng Fei was stupefied: “Marquis is an acquaintance of Shen Liang?”

Striding over in huge steps, Han Chuang chuckled: “Years ago in Handan City, Brother Shen assisted me greatly regarding several matters. How can I not recognize him?”

Feng Fei did not show any signs of suspicion and it appears that Xiang Shaolong’s standing in her heart has been enormously elevated due to Han Chuang’s testimony. She joyfully offered: “Shall Feng Fei (I) excuse herself so that Marquis can have a good catching up with this old friend?”

Of course she is just being polite but to her dismay, Han Chuang vigorously nodded his head: “Miss Feng is truly considerate and hospitable to our needs.”

Feng Fei was taken aback because this signifies that Xiang Shaolong is more revered by Han Chuang than herself. But since she had made the offer and could not withdraw her suggestion, Feng Fei retreated from the hall together with her serving maid Little Ping'er.

Sitting down beside Xiang Shaolong, Han Chuang gleefully remarked: "Knowing that Shaolong is safe, I was so happy I could not sleep at all!"

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze after hearing his declaration. All along, he wasn't a fan of Han Chuang and never expected him to place their friendship above his loyalty to his country.

He bitterly laughed: "Do not forget that little brother (I) is still the most wanted man of your esteemed country (Han)!"

Han Chuang sighed with a breath of air: "That is something beyond our control as we all strive to serve our own kings. For all you know, we may meet in the battlefield once again. However, our countries are not at war now so it is friendship above everything else!"

After a bitter smile, his eyes began to glow with deep gratitude before Han Chuang softly revealed: "In that battle which I lost and was eventually captured, I thought I was destined to die there and then. Unpredictably, Shaolong set me free without the least hesitation. I, Han Chuang, have never been so touched all my life. Right now, even if someone points a sword to threaten me, I would never do anything against Shaolong's interest."

Xiang Shaolong swore in a low voice: "The day of the official coronation of

the Crown Prince is the same day I will depart Qin for the wild plains beyond the borders. Therefore, Marquis need not worry about facing me in battle.”

Han Chuang was shocked: “Why would Yingzheng release you? Without you, Qin is as good as a body which has lost a limb.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “This is a pact between me and the Crown Prince. However, you must not be complacent because of my departure. Qin possesses countless valiant generals. Wang Jian, Huan Qi, Meng Wu and Meng Tian are not to be trifled with.”

Han Chuang disagreed: “I do not believe there is any general who is as good as you.”

Xiang Shaolong recapped: “Lest you forget, Li Mu gave me a thorough trashing and reduced me to a state of desolation.”

Han Chuang articulated: “Winning and losing is part and parcel of a military life. Moreover, you were defeated in the most splendid fashion and maintained the strength of your core army. So it can hardly be considered a genuine defeat. After the skirmish, Li Mu and I had a good discussion over it and he expressed his admiration for your war strategies. He originally intended to annihilate your entire army since it is deep in foreign territory but did not expect your faction to put up a fierce resistance in sacrifice. With this dragging him down, he is unable to pursue Teng Yi’s main army body before they returned to Zhongmou City, missing this golden opportunity. If he had been successful, we may organize another allied campaign and attack all the way to Xianyang Capital. Aye! The difference between a win and a loss

is often determined by a single stratagem.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Going by your reasoning, you should hate me to the core.”

Han Chuang awkwardly countered: “Shaolong need not tease me. After all, whatever happened has happened. The fact that I can still stay alive and have a good time now is all due to Shaolong’s kindness.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “Since we are all comrades, we can dispense with the pleasantries and formalities. I suppose there is more than meets the eye concerning your current trip to Lin Zi.”

Han Chuang smiled: “Shaolong knows me best. I personally cannot be bothered with the birthday of the King of Qi. However, I would never object to a trip to Lin Zi. Have you tried the local Qi girls? They will give you a night to remember.”

Xiang Shaolong was not the least surprised: “You are incorrigible, womanizing wherever you go.”

His face turning red, Han Chuang corrected: “Do not mock me for this is called: Living life to the fullest. In the future when the great Qin army marches east, the first to be eliminated is our State of Han. When that happens, it will be impossible for me to womanize even if I wanted to.”

Xiang Shaolong joked: “I am just kidding.”

Han Chuang heaved a sigh of relief: “Frankly speaking, I am fearful of you to a certain extent but in a respectful manner. As a result, you must speak to me in a lenient tone. Otherwise, it would be disastrous if I develop a phobia of womanizing.”

Both men exchanged a look and could not hold it any longer, bursting out in wild laughter, reveling in the sensation of barrier-less brotherhood.

Recalling an issue, Han Chuang brought up: “Did you know that the idiot Guo Kai presented your strange weapon to the King of Qi as a birthday gift, causing a huge dilemma over whether he should accept it or not. Ultimately, somebody suggested a counter strategy where the King of Qi would bestow the weapon upon Cao Quidao and enshrined it in the main hall of Qixia College.”

Xiang Shaolong is itching all over with agony: “I shall steal my Hundred Battle Sabre tonight.”

Han Chuang was aghast: “You must never do that. With his maturing years, Cao Cuidao that old fellow has made tremendous advancements upon his already godly sword skills. Shaolong may be an adept sword wielder but it would be inadequate against him.”

Xiang Shaolong laughingly jested: “I am going to steal, not going to rob. What is there to fear?”

Still worried as ever, Han Chuang advocated: “After Shaolong make your way back to Qin, you can request Yingzheng to write a letter demanding Qi to

return your weapon. I guarantee Qi would obediently follow his instructions. Why should you risk your life at this juncture?"

Xiang Shaolong inquired: "Let me think about it. Hey, it may be good to flex my muscles and see some action. Oh yes, did you have a secret agreement with Feng Fei?"

Han Chuang was awkward: "So you knew about it too. Is there a problem?"

Focusing his gaze on him for a while, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You really do fear me, don't you?"

Han Chuang bitterly laughed: "Even Li Mu is terrified of you, not to mention me. Just tell me what you have in mind! I can never envisage your motives."

Xiang Shaolong probed: "On this occasion when Feng Fei requested for your assistance, what benefits did she promise you?"

Han Chuang sighed: "Originally, it is a fair deal but since Shaolong is intervening, I shall have to painfully surrender my only opportunity to kiss Feng Fei on her lips." Xiang Shaolong was astounded: "What?"

Han Chuang was surprised: "You did not know about it? If I knew you have no idea, I would not have told you about it."

Inside his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing a rising tsunami. Since the beginning, regardless of Dong Shuzen or himself, everyone has been utterly deceived by Feng Fei into believing that Feng Fei will present Dong Shuzen

and her fellow courtesans to Han Chuang in return for his assistance. As this arrangement appears logical from all angles, even Xiang Shaolong did not have any doubts about its existence. Only now did he realize that it was a smokescreen by Feng Fei.

Why is she lying? What is the Head of the Three Famous Courtesans really cooking up?

When they first met, Feng Fei disclosed that she has accepted an assassination contract to poison him but decided to give up her attempt. The mastermind behind this assassination could be her secret lover.

He, Xiang Shaolong, has enemies all over the land. He is unable to make a guess from the countless possibilities.

After a long while, Xiang Shaolong inhaled a deep breath to clear his mind before whispering: "What does Feng Fei ask of you?"

Han Chuang divulged: "She needs to hide in one of my villas in Han for about three months. When the public has lost interest in her affairs, she will take her leave."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Does that mean she will leave Lin Zi under your escort?"

Han Chuang confirmed: "Of course. Who would dare to undermine my authority?"

Xiang Shaolong has unearthed another lie of Feng Fei for she did mentioned she would require Xiang Shaolong to assist her in leaving Lin Zi before meeting up with Han Chuang.

What is she trying to accomplish with all these schemes?

Han Chuang sighed: “Aye, we never expected Shaolong to be involved; I guess Lord Longyang and I can only watch helplessly as our missions end in failure!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: “The two of you are assisting her while harbouring selfish motives?”

Han Chuang replied in a grieving tone: “She is a rare and exceedingly attractive beauty. Who, in their right minds, would allow her to enter a reclusive life? Aye! In actual fact, Lord Longyang and I had a deal, letting me enjoy her for some time before allowing Lord Longyang to present her to the King of Wei. Presently, this deal is as good as gone, landing Lord Longyang in a predicament.”

Xiang Shaolong instead breathed in a mouthful of cool air before enquiring: “Do you know who is Feng Fei’s secret lover?”

Han Chuang was mystified: “Her heart has finally found a home? No wonder she became much more appealing and dazzling!”

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: “When did you first notice this change in her?”

After some contemplation, Han Chuang slowly announced: “It should be after her trip to Xianyang.”

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table and exclaimed: “In this case, her lover must be someone she met in Xianyang, paving the path for her retiring and marrying mindset. But why did she have to come all the way here before slipping away? Based on her intellect, she should know that no one is reliable, even the two of you.”

Han Chuang bitterly laughed: “After hearing your deductions, I am only more confounded than before. How should I proceed from here?”

Xiang Shaolong pondered: “Pretend that you are still in the dark and continue to liaise with her just like before. You must take care not to leak any information. We shall discuss further at a later date.”

Han Chuang agreed: “All right. I will now speak briefly with her before leaving. Are you aware of my current lodgings? I am residing at Tingmei Villa just two blocks away. Feel free to come to me if you need any help.”

When Han Chuang left for the inner courtyard to look for Feng Fei, Xiang Shaolong remained in the hall deep in thought.

Assuming that Feng Fei’s lover is from Xianyang and it is the same guy who instigated her to kill himself, Xiang Shaolong, therefore, it is highly probable that her lover is someone who belongs to Lu Buwei’s organization. But who can it be?

For someone to gain the affections of Feng Fei, he cannot be an ordinary folk. Can it be Guan Zhongxie or even Xu Shang?

On a more insightful level, it doesn't make sense because if her lover is working for Lu Buwei, Lu Buwei need not go to the extent of bribing Zhang Quan to investigate the identity of her lover.

Additionally, regardless of whether it is Guan Zhongxie or Xu Shang, neither man would abandon his glorious career for Feng Fei.

If her lover is not related to Lu Family, then who can he be?

In the middle of his intense, troubling speculation, Little Ping'er came and invited him to see Feng Fei. He easily concluded that Han Chuang has left before entering Feng Fei's room on the second storey of the main block. Once Little Ping'er excused herself to the lower floor, the conniving beauty glared unwavering at him with her lovely eyes, interrogating: "It seems like the powerful and influential men from various states are all your old buddies. This is really baffling, isn't it? Based on your impeccable connections, why were you living in desolation for two years in Daliang and eventually lowering yourself to become an ordinary carriage driver?"

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong was as steady as a rock for Zhang Quan genuinely recruited him from the official stables of Daliang. He plainly state: "It is because they are indeed my friends that I do not wish to implicate them."

Bewildered, Feng Fei pressed on: "What do you mean by that?"

Xiang Shaolong explained in a serious tone: “Guo Kai, the Premier of Zhao, and I are on irreconcilable terms. Moreover, if not for my intricate maneuvers, Great General Lian (Po) may have difficulty leaving Zhao in one piece. Thus, whoever that takes me in is akin to making himself an enemy of Guo Kai.”

Stunned for a short spell, Feng Fei slowly remarked: “You are well acquainted with several influential men all over the land but your relationship with them is not clear to me. How do I know I can trust you?”

Xiang Shaolong snapped: “Is there a difference? You had never trusted me.”

Her charming face turning frosty, Feng Fei unhappily disputed: “Except for the early stages of knowing you, when did I display any signs of misgiving?”

Hardening his resolve, Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed: “Who is Mistress’s secret lover?”

Feng Fei was thunderstruck: “Didn’t I tell you already?”

His face wearing a cool smirk as his eyes glowed like an icy blizzard, Xiang Shaolong very slowly shook his head, exposing: “That is just a delay tactic you used on me. Otherwise, Mistress would want to go to Zhongmou and not Xianyang.”

Upset, Feng Fei rebutted: “Is Manager Shen being too reckless when you assumed my distrust based on this singular point?”

With thoughts running through his mind at the speed of electricity, Xiang Shaolong simply proposed: “Why don’t your servant (I) try to guess the identity of Mistress’s secret lover, the man whom you are willing to live together with for the rest of your life.”

With a composed demeanor, Feng Fei serenely dared: “Your mouth belongs to you. Guess all you want.”

Xiang Shaolong is aware that she thinks he would never make the correct guess and to be honest, he had no idea too but is just employing a scare tactic. He laughed: “Does Mistress think it would be a difficult guess?”

Feng Fei shot him a look: “Any more rubbish from you and I will chase you out of my room.”

Brimming with confidence, Xiang Shaolong challenged: “Mistress would not bear to do so, for you love to play the scheming game. With a worthy opponent like myself, you are secretly overjoyed at my presence.”

Feng Fei howled: “How dare you pass this judgment on me!”

Xiang Shaolong was steadfast: “Like spotting glow worms among chicken feed, Mistress need not conceal the obvious. You should know better than anyone whether my words are true or false.”

Feng Fei was in a stupor: “Glow worms in chicken feed? Are there really worms that glow? How clever of you to think of that.”

She continued in a worried tone: “Say it! Do not beat around the bush.”

Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: “The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray. Based on your words, it is obvious that Mistress’s secret lover is not Xiang Shaolong.”

Her mouth curling up with disdain, Feng Fei remarked in an ordinary tone: “I am only curious at your crazy ideas. At no time did I acknowledge or deny anything.”

Moving to her back, Xiang Shaolong stretched out his hand, caressing her tender, zero fat abdomen with a small amount of strength, causing Feng Fei to moan in her sweet voice as she collapsed into his arms.

Nibbling her cute ear lobe and deeply inhaling her womanly fragrance, Xiang Shaolong gently revealed: “Your lover is from Qin and not only is he not Xiang Shaolong, he happens to be Xiang Shaolong’s nemesis.”

Feng Fei’s petite frame trembled but she insisted: “You have gone over the top. Where is the logic in all these predictions?”

Sticking his own face to her smooth face, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “It is very simple logic. You believed Zhang Quan is in cahoots with me and is using me to relay a message via Zhang Quan to Lu Buwei, causing him to mistakenly assume Xiang Shaolong is your lover.”

Feng Fei wondered: “But how did you infer that he is at loggerheads with Xiang Shaolong?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize he has exposed his own shortcoming. In his eagerness to succeed, he has inadvertently disclosed too much of his own knowledge. Only he himself knew about the incident when Feng Fei tried to assassinate him and he obviously could not divulge this piece of information. Frowning his brows, he spouted gibberish: "This news would serve to increase the enmity between Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong. If not for the fact that your lover is Xiang Shaolong's enemy, why would you sabotage him in such a manner?"

Feng Fei whined: "Do not utter nonsense. Firstly, I did not suspect you and Zhang Quan were partners and secondly, my lover is indeed Xiang Shaolong. Aye! I am confused after hearing your analysis. Can we take a break and will you please give me a kiss?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Is Mistress afraid of what I am going to say next?"

Feng Fei viciously struggled and extracted herself from his embrace. Turning her slender body around to face him, she confronted: "Bring it on! I want to hear what other outrageous thoughts that you may have!"

Using a finger to prop up her chin, Xiang Shaolong lightly pecked her lips before smiling: "What remains is an easy guess! In Xianyang, Xiang Shaolong's mortal enemies are Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's organizations. Whoever that can gain the affections of Mistress must hold some standing in society and is likely someone with both brains and brawn. It is neither Lu Buwei nor Lao Ai themselves because otherwise, Mistress need not scheme and lie your way through. Thus, it is as clear as day who our mystery figure is."

With a mixture of fear and shock initially printed on her face, Feng Fei instantaneously recomposed herself. Lowering her head, she conceded: "Please stop your meaningless charade. Feng Fei will definitely do your bidding in the future!"

Xiang Shaolong pressured on: "Finally showing your true colours? Or else you would not be singing a different tune now."

Feng Fei angrily threatened: "These are my heartfelt words; if you don't believe me, get lost."

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong stood up and served another scare: "I know who he is."

Feng Fei tranquilly commented: "I am very tired and I don't care if you know or do not know. I only wish for some peace and quiet right now."

As Xiang Shaolong made his way towards the stairs, he suddenly turned back with his body shaking. Glaring ferociously at Feng Fei, he declared: "He is Han Jie."

Feng Fei was visibly shaken and there was no trace of blood on her face anymore.

## **Chapter 04**

### **Evil upon One's Door**

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Despite Feng Fei's lack of admission, Xiang Shaolong is unwaveringly assured that her lover is Han Jie.

He can visualize Feng Fei getting to know Han Jie in Xianyang and both parties begin to rendezvous with full awareness that Lu Buwei or Lao Ai would surely object to their relationship. The critical factor is Lu Buwei is in cahoots with Lao Ai so even if Lao Ai approves of their relationship, it would still be in jeopardy.

As a result, the couple has decided to reunite in Qi before eloping or executing a similar plan. Since Han Jie is one of Cao Cuidao's top disciples, he can openly travel with Lu Buwei to Qi with good reason.

In this aspect, Xiang Shaolong's role as a troupe manager is absolutely crucial as Feng Fei requires someone to see to her travel arrangements and an appropriate cover up, allowing her to leave Qi unmolested.

Supposing Han Jie is Feng Fei's Prince Charming, the perpetrators behind his assassination must be a joint scheme between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei. For Feng Fei to change her mind, it must be due to her intention to elope with Han Jie. It would be unwise to bear the risk of this murder charge.

Delving deeper, Feng Fei could be acting on Tian Dan's instructions and was

given the poisonous ring by Lu Buwei. With a slow acting venom taking his life several days later or a venom that causes blindness, she can safely depart once she completed her assignment.

He may not possess all the fine details but Xiang Shaolong is confident that he has a good grasp of the big picture.

Before he could step out of the front hall, he collided with Xiao Yuetan who had came looking for him. The two men isolated themselves in the quiet eastern chamber.

Xiang Shaolong began: "Is there a way for you to obtain a blueprint of Qixia College?"

Xiao Yuetan was incredulous: "What do you want it for? Cao Cuidao is not to be trifled with."

Xiang Shaolong explained: "I am only going to steal something that rightfully belongs to me. The King of Qi has bestowed my Hundred Battle Sabre to Cao Cuidao and it is now hanging in the main hall of Qixia College."

Xiao Yuetan questioned: "I was about to tell you about it. Who did you get this information from?"

Xiang Shaolong told him everything about Han Chuang's morning visit. Knitting his brows in a giant frown, Xiao Yuetan thought long and hard in complete silence.

He finally warned: “Shaolong must not blame me for being a nag but I know Han Chuang’s character very well. He is a greedy pervert and is extremely selfish. To achieve his goals, he can forsake his integrity and morals. Although he owes you a huge debt of gratitude, it makes no difference when it comes to fulfilling his agenda.”

Recalling Han Chuang’s sincere outlook this morning, Xiang Shaolong found it arduous to agree with Xiao Yuetan’s point of view. Nevertheless Xiao Yuetan meant well and momentarily, Xiang Shaolong did not know what to reply.

Doing his best to persuade Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan advised: “Shaolong cannot afford to let your guard down. Presently, you are jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. You are not out of the woods yet. If I were you, I would never trust anyone from the Three States (Han Wei Zhao). Inversely, Li Yuan is much more reliable because at the end of the day, Chu is not under direct threat from Yingzheng’s aggressiveness.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I am alone by myself. It would be awfully easy for Han Chuang or Lord Longyang to take my life.”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: “You are too gullible. Firstly, Han Chuang and company knows that they must remain confidential about your presence. If Qi knows the truth, the King of Qi may welcome you as a VIP and honourably escort you back to Xianyang.”

Pausing, he added: “Or he may simply use this opportunity to get rid of you for good and no one will be the wiser.”

Xiang Shaolong kept silent.

Xiao Yuetan continued: "Currently, no one would dare to shoulder the responsibility of being your murderer. He who kills you today can expect the Great army of Qin descending on his city gates the next morning. I can assure you this is hardly amusing."

Xiang Shaolong wondered: "If they killed me in secret, who would know about it?"

Xiao Yuetan replied: "At least Li Yuan would know. Han Chuang and Lord Longyang cannot choose to sit idle too."

He added in laughter: "Our Shaolong is not a sitting duck and your sword skills are top notched. If you managed to escape a murderous attempt and coupled with the fact that this is not the territory of the Three States, who would have the guts to try and take your life a second time round? If I were in their shoes, I would do my best to reduce your suspicions and defenses, thereafter steadily luring you into an inescapable dead end before making my move. Even with your consummate abilities, strength and tricks, it would all be useless as you are ambushed and butchered."

Though his entire body is breaking out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong is still doubtful and gave a cursory assurance: "I will be careful!"

The objective Xiao Yuetan nodded: "Maybe I have been thinking too much! But it is better to be safe than sorry. Theoretically, Lord Longyang has tried to harm you before and it would be more challenging for him to harden his

resolve to repeat this crime. However, a man's heart is unfathomable. Furthermore, this implicates the survival of one's country and clan. Shaolong had better give it some serious thought!"

Patting Xiao Yuetan's shoulder, Xiang Shaolong gratefully thanked: "Now, Senior Brother you is the only man I can place all my trust without any reservations. Feng Fei's issue has grown in complexity."

Xiao Yuetan hastily enquired and after Xiang Shaolong revealed his conclusions, Xiao Yuetan mused with his brows locked in a frown: "I do not know Han Jie personally but seeing that he came all the way to Xianyang to seek his fortune, would he be willing to give up his career over a lady?"

Xiang Shaolong agreed: "It is said that Han Jie is a member of the Han Royalty and got acquainted with Lao Ai in Han a long time ago. For someone to be a close friend of Lao Ai, one can hardly expect him to be a man of integrity. If he is out to deceive Feng Fei and does not truly love her, the problem will be bigger than what I imagined."

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: "As outsiders, it is tough for us to comprehend the truth. Feng Fei is a definitely a beauty who can cause a man to sacrifice everything for her. Why don't Shaolong have a go at her, at least it is better than letting Han Jie obtain her."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "Knowing that her lover is Han Jie, I would be less inclined to get involved with her."

Slamming the table, Xiao Yuetan exclaimed: "I've got it! Feng Fei must have

decided to elope to Xianyang and become Han Jie's secret mistress. This matter has been approved by Lao Ai and all they need to do is keep Lu Buwei in the dark."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Feng Fei is really a cunning fox. Back on the ship when I confess to her that Lu Buwei is the mastermind behind Zhang Quan, she pretended to be surprise and desperate, thoroughly misleading me and implicating me in her devious scheme."

Xiao Yuetan disclosed: "I have discovered a piece of information that will only add to your worries. Are you keen to hear about it?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "I am already numb to all these upheavals. It would not affect me much even if I know about it."

Xiao Yuetan went on: "Upon my instructions, Zongsun Heji went looking for Zongsun Long to gather intelligence and he found out that this bloodsucker secretly spread rumours among the wayward students of Qixia, professing that you are proud of your capable swordsmanship and regarded the swordsmen of Qi with contempt. Aye! What a despicable cad. He is afraid of offending Li Yuan or Xie Ziyuan to resort to this underhand, indirect attack."

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders, remarking: "Someone already tried to assault me but he failed miserably. If they wish to attack me in an open manner, there is nothing to be afraid of. Don't tell me Cao Cuidao will personally come for me!"

Xiao Yuetan cautioned: "You must be extra vigilant against Ma Chenjia and

Min Tingzhang. These two men enjoy creating trouble wherever they go and they simply thrive in chaos. In addition, their sword skills are truly amazing.”

Before he could complete his sentence, family warrior Fei Chun came to report in a flustered manner: “Manager, bad news, a gang of hostile swordsmen have come barging in, demanding to see nobody but you.”

Both men exchanged a look of astonishment, secretly startled at the coincidence.

Xiang Shaolong do not wish for Xiao Yuetan to be embroiled in this troublesome affair and expose their intimate friendship. He insisted on facing this rowdy crowd all by himself.

Since he uncovered Feng Fei’s lies from his conversation with Han Chuang this morning, his act of chivalry is being replaced by feelings of disillusionment.

With regards to Han Jie, whose sword skills are comparable with his own, Xiang Shaolong neither adore nor detest him but if he were to label this man, Han Jie is unquestionably a man with dubious morals. Still, Feng Fei has fallen in love with his handsome looks so Feng Fei’s standing in his heart has fallen drastically. He may not be interested in Feng Fei but in the end, he would want her to dedicate the rest of her life to someone of good character.

With his new change of heart, he dreams of arranging the future paths of Dong Shuzen and her fellow courtesans, thereby accomplishing his mission and retiring from the scene. He would head back to Xianyang to reunite with

his pretty wives and lovely son, and wait patiently for Xiao Pan's coronation and his showdown between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's organization.

Xiao Yuetan may have pointed out Han Chuang's unreliability but he still holds faith that Han Chuang places their friendship beyond the reach of the dark side.

Until today, he still has the naïve mindset that there is goodness in everyone's heart because he himself is one shining example.

There is no one who abhors war and violence like himself but in these ancient times, it is as common as breathing.

In the midst of his thoughts, Xiang Shaolong crossed the door ledge and took his first step into the main hall of the front courtyard.

Five young Qi swordsmen of uneven height were standing in a single file in the centre of the hall. In the instant he treaded into the hall, he became the single focus of the ten eyeballs.

They were dressed in lavish warrior uniforms and by simply observing their ornate swords; one could tell that they are either the descendants of high ranking officials or the sons of rich businessmen.

Zhang Quan's trusted follower Kun Shan, together with family warriors Feng Liang and Lei Yun'er were wearing an angry expression on their faces as they stood at a side. It is obvious that they are annoyed at these arrogant and overbearing ruffians.

To be honest, Xiang Shaolong is not in the best of moods and would not mind venting his frustration on these men who had volunteered to be his punching bag. He is fully aware that acting out his emotions would only serve to blow the matter out of proportion and eventually lead to confrontations with the likes of Zongsun Xuanhua, Dan Chu, Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang, all the best fighters of Qi.

From their composure and aura, the five men in front of him are many notches below these accomplished swordsmen.

Nonetheless, he could not appear too subservient. Otherwise, these opponents would take advantage of the situation, causing him to lose his standing in Lin Zi.

Finding a balance among these factors is the true test of his competency.

Among them, the tallest and most burly youngster coldly grunted: “Are you the self-proclaimed Sword without Equal, dog-slave Shen Liang?”

Xiang Shaolong icily snorted and advanced quickly towards them.

The five men were shocked and all their hands move to press down on the hilt of their swords.

Halting suddenly about five feet away from the five men, his keen eyes speedily scanned and memorized the reactions of every one of them before Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “Who is this gentleman here and why did you make two mistakes in a single sentence?”

The lanky and stout youth seems to be the leader of the five men pack. Staring back, he answered in a sharp voice: "Throughout my life, my name is the owner of all my actions and will never change; 'Fast Sword' Nian Chang is the gentleman you are referring to. What mistakes did I make?"

From his tone, Xiang Shaolong knew that he (Nian Chang) has been stifled by his (XSL) own awe-inspiring aura. Secretly tickled, he plainly retorted: "Firstly, I do not think very much of my sword skills and secondly, I am not a dog-slave."

Another shorter and stocky youth jested: "As a servant to the courtesans, who are you but a dog-slave?"

As the other four men began to jeer and howl with laughter, somebody added: "Get your Master to come out and apologise and we will consider letting you off!"

The expressions of Kun Shan, the two family warriors as well as Fei Chun who came in with Xiang Shaolong started turning ugly at the insults. In the same breath, they acknowledge that these men cannot be trifled with and were dejected with helplessness.

With an air of unaffectedness, Xiang Shaolong acted surprised and yelled: "AH! So anyone who is working for somebody else is classified as a dog-slave. Therefore, in Qi, everyone besides the King is a dog-slave too?"

The five men are all brawn and no brains. Dumbfounded, they did not know how to verbally counter him.

His voice turning gentle, Xiang Shaolong saluted: “May I boldly ask the five gentlemen here, who personally told you I boasted about my swordsmanship as being without equal. Can we find this man to corroborate his statement with me? If it turns out to be true, I, Shen Liang, would kowtow to make amends.”

The five men glanced at one another speechlessly.

Using this break, Kun Shan interrupted: “Your servant had already told you it must be somebody slandering Manager Shen!”

With an irritated expression, Nian Chang dared: “Since we came all the way here, we cannot leave empty handed. Why don’t Manager Shen show us a move or two?”

Xiang Shaolong cackled: “This is easy. My sword skills may not be as good as the five gentlemen but I have some other tricks of my own. Watch it!”

In the middle of his roar, he lifted his left and right arm concurrently, allowing two concealed daggers to smoothly slide into his hands from his sleeves. In the same momentum, he shot out both daggers horizontally to his front, flawlessly and accurately embedding them into the frame of a window. There is no difference in height between the positions of the two daggers.

The faces of everyone present became void of colour, including Kun Shan.

The most challenging part is a simultaneous attack from both hands with deadly speed and accuracy.

Conscious that he has displayed enough prowess to satisfy these clowns, he bowed and paid his respects: "I have errands to run and will not send gentlemen off!" He solemnly turned his back to them and left the hall.

Under the cover of Xiao Yuetan's carriage, Xiang Shaolong left Tingsong Villa and proceeded in search of the 'most reliable' Li Yuan.

Xiao Yuetan praised: "Shaolong understood the psychology of Qi citizens very well, mindful that they value their reputation above all else. After your excellent display, the five kids would surely hide the truth and lied that you apologized to them, causing other troublemakers to lose interest in you."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed: "Zongsun Long is a Qi national too who values his reputation more than anyone else. He will not give up easily."

Xiao Yuetan grinned: "Now that you are getting Li Yuan to intercede, Zongsun Long will have to let you go no matter what happens."

Pausing, he questioned in a low voice: "Do you know that just a while ago, Feng Fei and Little Ping'er were escorted by several of her trusted subordinates out of the Villa through the back door?"

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: "How did you know?"

Xiao Yuetan responded: "It was Yun Niang who saw it and told me about it."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Are they going to rendezvous with Han Jie? How I wish I can stalk her."

Xiao Yuetan advised: “You are not familiar with Lin Zi and it would be a miracle if no one discovers you.”

In this moment, the sound of hoof beats can be heard as several horses tried to catch up to the carriage from the back.

Sticking his head out for a look, Xiang Shaolong saw that it was Boss Jin, Jin Chenjiu chasing him with several of his troupe members. Boss Jin called out: “Manager Shen, please wait up.”

Xiao Yuetan commanded the driver to stop the carriage.

Cantering to the side of the carriage window, Boss Jin professed: “Is Manager Shen available for a quick chat?”

Xiang Shaolong would never reject him and nodded his head in consent. To Xiao Yuetan, he whispered: “Senior Brother must remember to get me a map of Qixia College. I will make my way to Li Yuan’s residence on my own.”

As Xiang Shaolong disembarked from the horse carriage, Boss Jin dismounted from his horse and led him to a nearby wine house. After locating a secluded and quiet corner, he sat down and cautioned: “Brother Shen! Trouble awaits you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “My troubles are endless as of now. An extra one would not make any difference.”

Gesturing a thumbs up, Boss Jin praised: “Brother Shen is a true hero indeed.

I, Boss Jin, did not befriend the wrong person.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart warming up: “Boss Jin is the better buddy between the two of us. What is it about?”

Boss Jin explained: “Tian Dan hosted a welcoming banquet for Lu Buwei last night and both Sufang and I were present. Incidentally, I was seated at the same table with a subordinate of Zongsun Long. As we chatted idly, he asked if I knew who you are. Of course I did not tell him the truth about our friendship.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “Are they issuing a reward for my precious head?”

Laughing raucously, Boss Jin commended: “Brother Shen is really open minded. Things are not so serious yet though. Have you heard of Qixia Sword Meet?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head to indicate his ignorance.

Boss Jin articulated: “On the first day of every month, Qixia College would host a riding and archery jamboree, providing newcomers a platform to showcase their abilities. Today is the 27th. The next Sword Meet is three days later. As usual, they would invite some guests to participate. Hey! It is just a polite way of saying it. In actual fact, they are looking for dueling opponents.”

Xiang Shaolong snickered: “If they try to invite me, I would fake an illness to reject the invitation. Don’t tell me they can make me attend the Sword Meet by force!”

Boss Jin sighed: “The invitation cards are sent out by the King of Qi. Does Brother Shen have the guts to reject the King’s invitation? I heard that Zongsun Xuanhua, the son of Zongsun Long, is infuriated with Brother Shen and has decided to personally teach you a lesson on the dueling ground. He would not dare to take your life and only wooden swords are used but due to his sword strength, he can easily break one of Brother Shen’s legs.”

His brows immediately creased into a huge frown. Xiang Shaolong is not concerned about the unbeatable fighter of Lin Zi, Zongsun Xuanhua. He is more concerned that Tian Dan and Lu Buwei may be spectators at the Meet and it would be a miracle if they failed to single him out.

Boss Jin assured in a low voice: “Brother Shen should leave Lin Zi under the cover of the night. I am positive Miss Feng would not bear grudges against you.”

Xiang Shaolong is highly motivated for this is a brilliant plan but what about Dong Shuzen and the other ladies? If he left without a care, this episode would surely become a knot in his heart and he will never find peace for the rest of his life.

Boss Jin continued to egg him on: “Zongsun Long’s influence is overwhelming such that even high ranking officials and men of influence and stature are terrified of him. Brother Shen can never hope to overcome him.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air: “My utmost appreciation for Boss’s reminder. I may just have a way to manage this situation.”

Finishing his sentence, he patted Boss Jin on his shoulder and went in search of Li Yuan.

## **Chapter 05**

### **Touring Cow Mountain**

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Li Yuan is a guest resident at Tingzhu Villa, which is located just two streets away from Tingsong Villa. From this arrangement, one can infer that Feng Fei's status is equivalent to that of a State Chancellor Li Yuan.

Arriving at the Villa entrance, he reported his name Shen Liang to the sentry. Upon hearing his name, the guard came to attention and respectfully saluted: "Good day to you Master Shen, Chancellor has left instructions about your possible visit. However, Chancellor has just left the Villa. Would Master Shen like to leave a message?"

Xiang Shaolong initially wanted to leave a note asking Li Yuan to come and look for him but rationalize that it is inappropriate given his lowly status. He simply remarked: "I have to trouble Mister to inform Chancellor that I did came by. That's all."

At this juncture, the central gate swung wide open and an elaborate carriage escorted by several riders in the front and back drove out of the residence. As the carriage window curtains are not drawn up, the passenger could not been seen.

As the carriage drew further and further away, Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to inquire about its occupant and began trekking his way home.

The weather was excellent; it was cold but it was a comfortable kind of cool. As Xiang Shaolong strode along the congested and lively streets among other pedestrians and vehicles, his heart, on the other hand, was feeling lonely and solitary.

While he was on the run, all his energy and time is dedicated towards avoiding enemy search teams and related considerations. Although he has entered Lin Zi and is now surrounded by both old and new friends, he was feeling lonesome instead.

He glanced about his surroundings, soaking in the magnificent views of the Qi Capital, deeply experiencing the meaning of the proverb ‘Surrounded by luxury, feeling sad and lonely’.

Besides Xiao Yuetan, there is no one he could trust.

The most maddening fact is that he did not have any warriors at his personal disposal. Otherwise, he could simply send someone to keep Han Chuang under surveillance and easily determine if Han Chuang would betray him or not. For example, if Han Chuang visits Guo Kai on a regular basis, it would indicate his disloyalty.

The Three States have always been on intimate terms with one another and Guo Kai’s Lady Boss is Han Chuang’s clanswoman Han Jing. If he wants to do something against Xiang Shaolong’s interests, both men would definitely form a partnership. Under those circumstances, even Lord Longyang could not voice his objection.

Their only stumbling block is Li Yuan but whether Li Yuan would risk offending the Three States to protect him is still an unknown fact.

As his mind weighed down with these issues, his senses suddenly tingled with alarm. A single horseman is seen riding towards him from the front and as he got nearer, the rider gazed downwards at him, checking: "How do I address Brother?"

Xiang Shaolong stared at him with astonishment and after confirming that he has never seen this man before in his life, he raised his alertness and quizzed: "What is going on?"

The rider was reasonably polite and smiled: "My Mistress is Lady Qingxiu and I was commanded by her to invite Mister to meet her. As Mistress did not tell me the honourable name of Mister, I had to trouble you for it."

Realizing that the convoy which departed earlier from Tingzhu Villa belongs to Lady Qingxiu, Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: either Li Yuan has told her about his presence in Lin Zi or his disguise is really terrible.

Thus, he gave his name as Shen Liang and accompanied the horseman to meet this beauty who has had an unhappy marriage.

Boarding Lady Qingxiu's carriage that was waiting by the roadside, the beauty who has concealed her gorgeous face behind a few layers of veil greeted in her usual wintery voice: "How are you doing, Great General! Please sit beside Qingxiu."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling disappointed that he did not get to see her face. Additionally, he is conscious that her invitation for him to sit down beside her is not because of intimacy but rather a more convenient way to hold a secret conversation. He hurriedly stabilized his emotions and sat down.

A whiff of womanly fragrance began invading his nose and mind as the carriage move slowly along the busy highway of the ancient capital.

All of a sudden, his loneliness has completely evaporated. As the carriage shook occasionally, causing their shoulders to knock against each other, he could not help but recall the wonderful and moving time in Daliang when Ji Yanran shared a similar episode with him.

Lady Qingxiu plainly state: “Great General’s masquerade is truly brilliant. If not for Qingxiu hearing about Great General’s arrival in Lin Zi from Chancellor Li (Yuan), I would not have recognized you.”

A relieved Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I certainly hope Chancellor Li would not tell everyone he met that I am here in the State of Qi.”

Lady Qingxiu was displeased: “Chancellor Li is not someone who does not know what he is doing. He did not hide the truth from me because after all, Qingxiu is the best friend of Grand Tutor Qin!”

Xiang Shaolong shot his mouth off: “I thought Your Ladyship is not on good terms with Chancellor Lee!”

Looking out of the window through the curtain, Lady Qingxiu kept silent for

some time before softly suggesting: “It is snowing again. I wonder what scenery Cow Mountain will offer? Is Great General interested to accompany Qingxiu for a tour of Cow Mountain?”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to propose a tour out of the blue and even invited him to accompany her. He stammered: “Cow Mountain?” At the same time, his heart was filled with surprise and shock at her warm hospitality.

The sky began to darken as flakes of snows gently and feebly descended on earth.

Appearing to be in deep contemplation, Lady Qingxiu stared out of the window and gently articulated: “Touring Cow Mountain during the rainy Spring season is widely regarded as the top attraction among the eight top touring locations of Lin Zi. Due to recent deforestation, Cow Mountain is wastefully degenerating into a barren highland. Fortunately, after a bout of tree planting, it is overheard that it has regained its spread of bountiful forestry and seas of greenery. Of course this cannot be seen as it is still winter!”

Xiang Shaolong finally discovered the origin of the saying: As barren as Cow Mountain. He nodded: “Since Your Ladyship is feeling adventurous, I dare not reject your offer.”

After instructing the convoy to proceed towards Cow Mountain, Lady Qingxiu enthused with anticipation: “When Qingxiu was young, I did visit Cow Mountain with my late father. It was in March during Spring. There were gushing streams formed by spring water seeping out of crevices of Cow

Mountain, materializing into a descending body of water. With mass evaporation, it resembles a combination of rain and mist, giving the impression of a smoky downpour. Till today, the scene is deeply ingrained in my memory.”

Listening to her eloquent description and witnessing her graceful aura, Xiang Shaolong was immensely mesmerized. Secretly picturing her face veils to be the smoky rain of Cow Mountain, he was bedazzled at her attractive though blurry face.

Lady Qingxiu continued: “Qingxiu is always perturbed when revisiting past sites of beautiful sceneries. I am deeply fearful that it may become different from what I previously remembered.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Then why are we revisiting this attraction?”

Lady Qingxiu shook her head slowly: “I do not understand too. Maybe it is because I am presently accompanied by the earth-shattering figure Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong noted: “It appears that I hold certain weightage in the heart of Your Ladyship.”

Glancing at him, Lady Qingxiu whispered: “Earlier, when I noticed Great General standing alone outside the Villa gates and comparing it to Great General being at the top of the command chain in Xianyang, I can clearly experience a world of difference between the two and the intense sensation

of how things have changed with the times. Finally, I could not bear it and had to stop my carriage to see Great General. Does Great General find me ridiculous?”

Xiang Shaolong was startled: “So Your Ladyship is feeling sympathetic towards me.”

Shaking her head, Lady Qingxiu clarified: “It is not sympathy but adoration. Does Great General know that you are in grave danger?”

At this moment, the carriage drove through the city gates and headed towards the south.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I am sure there is a logical explanation behind Your Ladyship’s words. Shaolong is all ears.”

Lady Qingxiu simply admired: “In my entire life, it is once in a blue moon for Qingxiu to experience anything that matches Great General’s nonchalance and indifference about his safety. Even if it is not on the account of Senior Sister Qin, Qingxiu would assist you all the same.”

Suppressing his voice to a lower volume, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Can your bodyguards be trusted?”

Lady Qingxiu assured: “Great General can put your mind at ease! These family warriors have been in my service for over ten years; in addition, they would never have guessed that you are Xiang Shaolong!” After a pause, she leaned in closer and speak with her breath landing on his ear and her veil

occasionally rubbing against his face: “Chancellor Li entered the palace yesterday to look for my sister, Lady Ning and was wearing a depressed and pained expression. Only upon my interrogation did he reveal your affairs.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “This is bad. Did he say anything else?”

Lady Qingxiu lamented: “He would never confide the truth to me but I am certain that he truly appreciates and view Great General as his bosom buddy. However, he is the Chancellor and it is more often than not where he has to put aside his personal feelings and put the State’s interests above his own. Otherwise, he would not be so troubled.”

As if she does not want to get too close to him, Lady Qingxiu suddenly turned her face away, sighing a breath as she gazed out of the window.

Sighing along with her, Xiang Shaolong was speechless for some time. He concluded that when Li Yuan initially saw him, that was his genuine and authentic behavior but in afterthought, reality and practicability would set in. His troubled mind could also be due to Han Chuang giving pressure.

Except for Xiao Yuetan, who else can he trust now?

A word at a time, Lady Qingxiu slowly advised: “If not for the terrible weather, I would recommend Great General to simply depart now that we are outside the city. It will be a good and clean getaway.”

Recalling the days when he was critically ill and staggering along the unfamiliar roads of Daliang, Xiang Shaolong was filled with apprehension. He

sighed: "I still have some unfinished business. Besides, I would certainly not be a sitting duck even if someone tries to come after me. Aye! Before Your Ladyship's warning, I did anticipate this development."

Lady Qingxiu nodded: "History has long proven Xiang Shaolong to be someone who is able to overcome danger and difficulties. Until now, no one has a clear picture of what is going. Maybe I am just overly worried!" Abruptly, she joyfully pointed to a faraway hill beyond the window and exclaimed: "Look! That is the tomb of Guan Zhong, the famed Premier who assisted Henggong to acclaimed success and dominance."

Naturally leaning forward and trailing her far gaze, Xiang Shaolong can only see the mountainous wilderness blanketed with a layer of silver snow and every tree branch laden with snowflakes. It was an absolutely spotless, breath-stopping white wonderland. The snowy landscape seems to have merged with the sky, resulting in no difference between the two.

Not far away a huge mountain stood erected as River Zi and River Nv, the two rivers meandered from east to west. Lined along the river shores were towering, centuries-old pine and birch trees. The backdrop was unbelievable.

Several mountains were connected to the first along the southern direction, forming a series of peaking mountain range. It was a breathtaking sight.

Lady Qingxiu lowered her head, softly remarking: "Great General, you..."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize his own chest is tightly pressed against the side of her shoulder. He awkwardly shifted away and after observing the

environment, he perceived: “Without a ship to cross the river, we cannot ascend the mountain and enjoy the fantastic view from above!”

Lady Qingxiu simply decided: “It is time to go back! If I wanted to look for Great General in the future, what should I do?”

Noticing her tone turning chilly, Xiang Shaolong can feel his pride swelling and replied in a low voice: “Your Ladyship has better not get involved in this matter. Life and Death is predetermined. If Heaven does not bless me, Xiang Shaolong, what can I do? Man cannot go against the Will of Heaven.”

Lady Qingxiu lightly shuddered: “Man cannot go against the Will of Heaven. Great General is indeed open-minded. I shall not interfere any further.”

Back at Tingsong Villa, Xiang Shaolong’s mind is still persistently filled with images of Lady Qingxiu.

He could not understand the strong influence she exerts over him. It could be due to her indifferent and cold attitude towards life or her graceful style of cool arrogance that has moved his heart.

Fortunately, he is bristling with alertness at the slightest sign of danger. Using his spare time, he analyzed the layout of Tingsong Villa down to the smallest details in readiness of a swift evacuation in times of peril. Only after retrieving his grappling hooks and ropes and securely fastening them around his waist did he finally steadied his frayed nerves.

Once he settled some routine troupe responsibilities and visited the

bedridden but recovering Zhang Quan, he retreated to his own room for a break. Just as he was about to fall asleep, Dong Shuzen came a knocking.

Hugging his blanket, Xiang Shaolong sat up as Dong Shuzen nestled herself on the side of his bed. She was astonished: “Has Manager Shen caught a cold?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I am as fit as a fiddle and can kill two tigers right now. What is the purpose behind Second Mistress’s visit?”

Calming down from her shock, Dong Shuzen patted her perky bosom, exclaiming: “You gave me a fright!” Shooting him a look, she admonished: “Must I visit you only when I have a purpose? Come! Let me give you a massage. I guarantee you will have a good nap thereafter.”

Flipping his body and lying prostrate on his bed, Xiang Shaolong was pleased: “Let me experience the excellent massage skills of Second Mistress.”

Dong Shuzen took off her outer coat and conveniently kicked her cotton shoes away. Sitting on his back, she reached out and grinded his shoulder muscles, revealing in a low voice: “I have discovered the culprit who switched the song sheet.”

Without thinking at all, Xiang Shaolong remarked: “It is Little Ning.” Little Ning is Zhu Xiuzhen’s personal serving maid.

Dong Shuzen was thrilled: “This time round, Manager Shen is wrong. The criminal is Zhang Quan himself. Little Ning did catch him acting sneakily near her room and found the room to be slightly untidy upon entering but did not

think too much about it. She only confessed to this after Xiuzhen's interrogation."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "I do not believe a word of it. It is Little Ning framing Zhang Quan for her own wrongdoing. Ow! This spot is really comfortable. I am going to doze off!"

Dong Shuzen panicked: "Do not doze off yet. Do you have any news regarding the promise you committed to me?"

Xiang Shaolong knows she is asking about the issue of Feng Fei allowing her to sing solo for one of the routines. Distressed, he honestly admitted: "I have not had the opportunity to talk to her about it. Shall I update you tomorrow instead?"

Dong Shuzen prone down and embraced him in a bear hug, biting his ear as she questioned: "I heard that you and Han Chuang go way back and are old buddies. Would you assist him in harming me?"

Xiang Shaolong is not as confident about Han Chuang as before. He bitterly smiled: "We are just acquaintances! And definitely not old buddies as you mentioned. Second Mistress can put your mind at ease. As long as I am still breathing, I would do my best for Second Mistress."

Dong Shuzen shivered once and wondered: "Shen Liang, why are you sounding so negative today? Where has your confidence and willpower disappeared to?"

Xiang Shaolong did a big body flip, pressing her below his body and greedily kissing her tender lips. It was only when she began to moan did he release her, explaining: "Life is unpredictable; no man can be confident about everything in the future. We can only strive to do our best which is why I require full trust and cooperation from both of you."

Her pupils dilating as she stared at him, Dong Shuzen's eyes begin to shine with searing flames of passion as she whispered: "You are not only into men (but women as well)."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "When did I ever admit I am into men?" At the same time, he was becoming highly aroused.

Ever since he reckoned the possibility of betrayal by Han Chuang or the others, his spirits have sunk to unfathomable depths and are at an all time low. He was desperate to indulge in some excitement to distract himself and Dong Shuzen has 'volunteered' to provide the excitement he needs.

Maybe it is only through her Sexy figure can he forget about all the unhappy events.

Hooking his neck with her arms, Dong Shuzen softly dared: "Words are just empty talk. I need to see some real action to prove that you are into women."

As his wall of determination came crashing down, Xiang Shaolong lowered his head and was about to taste the lipstick on her lips when someone called out beyond his door: "Master Shen, Official Xie Ziyuan is here and is waiting for

you in the main hall.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sense of uneasiness. There are several hours till sunset. Why is Xie Ziyuan so early?

## Chapter 06

### Expired Love

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Xie Ziyuan had a ghastly expression on his face and appears to be in distress. The moment he saw Xiang Shaolong, he began dragging him towards the main entrance, explaining: "Little Brother unexpectedly has something urgent to attend to and may not be able to fetch Brother Shen at the predetermined time. Therefore, I chose to come by much earlier."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Since Brother Xie has an important task at hand, we can simply postpone our activities."

Xie Ziyuan shook his head and apologized: "That would land me in hot soup. Originally, I thought of sending someone to fetch you but felt that was inappropriate after reconsideration. Moreover, it is more convenient this way, as I will be passing by. Once I delivered Brother Shen back to my residence, you'll have to make do without Little Brother for some time."

As the two men stepped out of the main gate, they entered the square where thirty odd family warriors were awaiting their esteemed presence with horses and a carriage.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong witness Xie Ziyuan in such a grand and imposing procession. He was amazed: "Brother Xie is truly awe-inspiring."

Shaking his head, Xie Ziyuan sighed: "It is not my style to take on a high

profile but Zongsun Long demanded I do so. Let's speak further in the carriage."

An attendant opened the carriage door and the two men climbed aboard, taking their respective seats. As the carriage drove out of the Villa, Xie Ziyuan sighed with a breath: "Don't be misled by the lively and prosperous appearance of Lin Zi. Behind the scenes, every person can barely fend for themselves and one will never know when trouble will come knocking."

Xiang Shaolong probed in a low voice: "Is Brother Xie referring to the two princes fighting for the throne of Qi?"

Xie Ziyuan was astounded: "I did not expect Brother Shen to know about these insider information."

Xiang Shaolong wondered: "I just have a rough idea about what is going on. Looking at Brother Xie's heavy frown, has something abrupt happened, causing Brother Xie so much anxiety?"

Sighing again, Xie Ziyuan insisted in a deep voice: "For Brother Shen, some things are better left unknown. I shall send Brother Shen to my residence first for a talk with my wife. After meeting Zongsun Long, I shall return back to see Brother Shen. Hey! No matter what, we must definitely have a good time tonight. Brother Shen should be capable of negotiating with my wife, right?"

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh: "I thought Brother Xie has forgotten all about it."

Xie Ziyuan bitterly laughed: “Compared to all previous occasions, Little Brother is most wanting now for a visit to a brothel to de-stress.”

Xiang Shaolong is concerned about Shan Rou and his love covers her family, which includes Xie Ziyuan as well. Nonetheless, he is conscious that Xie Ziyuan would not easily reveal the intricacies of the palace infighting to an outsider like himself. His mind thinking at the speed of electricity and grasping the genuine reason, he tested his theory: “Is it Lu Buwei deploying some devious scheme?”

Xie Ziyuan was thunderstruck: “How did Brother Shen know about this?”

Lowering his voice, Xiang Shaolong clarified: “I did stay in Xianyang for a period of time and was on extremely good terms with the movers and shakers of the Qin Court, leading to my familiarity with Lu Buwei’s evil methods, resulting in my calculated guess.”

Xie Ziyuan was caught in a daze for a while before reflecting: “Movers and Shakers. This is the first time Little Brother has heard this phrase and after thinking thoroughly, it is such an apt description. Who are the people that Brother Shen is familiar with?”

Xiang Shaolong mentioned the names Li Si, the Lord Changping Brothers and naturally included his own name.

Upon hearing, Xie Ziyuan was left gaping with his mouth wide open and tongue-tied. Exhaling a breath, he observed: “That means Brother Shen is well-acquainted with the loyal subjects of Yingzheng? The best of the lot is

Xiang Shaolong. Despite using every trick in the book, Lu Buwei is still unable to trip him up. By the way, Brother Shen, is Yingzheng the son of Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji?”

Xiang Shaolong resolutely affirmed: “Of course not! Otherwise, their relationship would not be so strained. What did Lu Buwei do exactly that has caused Brother Xie so much agony? Did he make some remarks to your Great King?”

Xie Ziyuan is truly a kind soul. Shaking his head, he enlightened: “The affairs which I am involved in are of such importance that any allusions would result in the extermination of one’s clan. Little Brother is afraid of implicating Brother Shen. It is better for Brother Shen to stay out of this.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that it would be unkind to press on any further and he secretly swore to prevent anyone from exterminating the household of Shan Rou. However, he is unable to come up with a suitable solution for he is unaware of the whole picture.

Xie Ziyuan changed the topic: “It seems like Feng Fei holds Brother Shen in high regard!”

Remembering the ever-complex relationship between Feng Fei and himself, he plainly muttered a reply. Focusing his attention back to the succession dispute of Qi, he realized that he could not longer ignore this event for it has a direct impact on Shan Rou’s household.

Tian Dan and Lu Buwei are professionals when it comes to the scheming

game. Faced with opponents like Zongsun Long, Xie Ziyuan and supported by the other States, it is still unclear who will be the final victor.

It would be wonderful if Zou Yan is still around. All this world-famous fortune telling grandmaster has to do is to point to the stars and say a few words to overpower all the persuasion and debating strategies thrown at the King of Qi.

By this time, the carriage has arrived at Xie Residence and Xiang Shaolong disembarked. Without dismounting at all, Xie Ziyuan rode the same carriage to Zongsun Long's Villa for a secret meeting with their allies.

A maid led Xiang Shaolong into the inner residence to see Shan Rou. Along the way, Xiang Shaolong repeatedly warned himself mentally, reminding himself that Shan Rou has become the wife of another man and there must not be any rekindling of past love. Otherwise, he would be acting against his own conscience.

Shan Rou, without a doubt, is still Shan Rou. Without the slightest display of womanly vulnerability, she expectedly chased all her servants to the side hall before going straight to the point: "Have I become a man-eating tiger after getting married? How dare you flee for your life at the first sight of me? Have you developed a habit of running for your life?"

Continuing with a 'pu ci' giggle, she shot him a look with the aura of a milf, laughing as she panted: "An \*\*\*\*\* will be an \*\*\*\*\* wherever he goes. How dare you collaborate with Ziyuan to deceive me? If not for Zhi Zhi's (Zhao Zhi) account, I would have broken both your dog legs."

Witnessing Shan Rou's ferociousness, Xiang Shaolong was instead relieved. Vulgarly taking a seat, he smiled: "Why aren't you bringing me your two white and chubby sons for a look? Little Brother is extremely fond of anyone who resembles Madam Rou. Are they born inherently with fist fighting and leg kicking skills?"

Shan Rou laughed heartily like the shaking of flowers on branches, collapsing onto the floor. She wailed: "How I wish I can give you a beating right now. Aye! After become the Mistress of the Xie household, it is not easy to find someone who would retaliate physically or verbally. With Master unwilling to duel and coupled with his batch of useless disciples, my hands are really itching."

Xiang Shaolong finally understood: "No wonder Brother Xie is terrified of you."

Glaring viciously at him, Shan Rou hissed: "Don't make me sound so frightening. Shall we have a friendly duel using wooden swords?"

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave: "Your Master has four top disciples and I know two of them are Han Jie and Zongsun Xuanhua. Who are the other two?"

With a look of contempt on her face, Shan Rou disparaged: "What four top disciples? I have no idea. I only know Master is most fond of me, Shan Rou. That turtle egg Zongsun Xuanhua is just a cowardly good for nothing. Every time I suggested a friendly exchange, he would make up all sorts of excuses. How I wish I could cut his balls off. Hee!"

Hearing that, Xiang Shaolong could not help but hold his tummy and burst out into laughter. Even though this obstinate beauty has become a mother of two children, she did not lose a single bit of her unique style, satisfying him to a great extent. He took the opportunity to ask: “Does Tian Dan know you have become Madam Xie?”

Shan Rou coldly grunted: “So what if he knows about it. That old crook should prepare a huge prayer session to thank his ancestors and Heaven that I did not pursue the matter any further. Aye! It is really bizarre. After killing the fake dummy, all the hatred and anger in my heart has dissipated. Although that villain is still alive and kicking, I have long regarded him as a dead man.”

Xiang Shaolong grew solemn: “Shall we talk about something more serious? Are you familiar with Han Jie? What kind of person is he? What is his character like?”

Pouting her cute little mouth, Shan Rou scorned: “What kind of good man would end up as Lao Ai’s partner in crime? He has earned neither my admiration nor respect. However, his sword skills do hold water.”

She suddenly frowned: “Why are you not on your way back to Xianyang? Zhi Zhi must be worried sick.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I ended up here because there was no other way out. Do you think I am here to tour the local sights?”

Shan Rou nodded: “I heard both the roads and the river has been blockaded

due to several days of continuous snow storm. One cannot survive without a decent fire stove. When the weather gets better, I will get Ziyuan to send you away!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock: “You must never do that. Brother Xie must not know about my real identity. If this matter leaks out, he would be found guilty of deceiving the King.”

Shan Rou proudly declared: “Based on the reputation of the Xie Family, worse come to worse, he would only lose his official post. What’s so good about being an official?”

Xiang Shaolong is aware that her hatred and opposition is due to her father holding an official post and eventually facing a clan extermination order. He agreed: “Brother Xie is too kind and gullible! It is not very suitable for someone of his character to thrive in officialdom.”

Shan Rou chuckled: “Neither you nor him are good people anyway; forever thinking of having a good time outside with other women. You nearly became an accomplice.”

Xiang Shaolong simply reasoned: “The less he gets, the more he wants. You can try forcing him to visit brothels for ten straight nights. I guarantee he would be so sick of them he would avoid them like plague in the future. Besides, he visits brothels for inspiration for his music composition and is not really sleeping around.”

Her almond shaped eyes staring at him, Shan Rou interrogated: “Did he plead

with you to negotiate with me on his behalf?"

In actual fact, like Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong is terrified of Shan Rou. He raised his arms, surrendering: "Big Sister Rou should know whose side I am on!"

Thawing, Shan Rou sweetly smiled: "Of course I know la! It is wonderful that you are here. How about this? While Ziyuan is having a good time outside, you shall accompany me."

Xiang Shaolong stammered: "What?"

Shan Rou justified: "It is only fair!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "To be honest, I am spending every day thinking of how to preserve my life. I..."

Shan Rou scolded: "Forget it! You think you are so desirable? Who needs your company? Both of you better scram as far as you can; otherwise, do not blame me for being merciless."

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded at her words.

Shan Rou instead shot him a look and cackled with a 'pu ci': "I'm just scaring you. How would I bear to chase you away? Master Xiang is little girl's first lover. If I cannot even grant such a small request, how can you face up to Ziyuan's expectations? How about this? I shall permit the two of you to have all the fun you want tonight but you must return by 11 o'clock, otherwise,

Ziyuan will have to sleep at your place.” Rubbing her tummy, she wailed: “We shall not wait for Ziyuan any longer! I’m hungry.”

When dinner is over and there is still no sight of Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to bid farewell and made his way back to Tingsong Villa. Just as he stepped into the Villa, the sentry reported: “Chancellor Li from Chu sent someone to look for Master Shen but Master Shen is not around so he left. Hey. Master Shen is truly well connected. Our band of brothers will follow you in the future!”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong was thinking: I can barely fend for myself, how am I supposed to take care of so many of you? As he gave a token response, this young family warrior named Chi Zichun lowered his voice and disclosed: “Your servant has something to report to Master Shen. It is something for Master Shen to be aware of and it mustn’t be known to others that it was I who leaked this information to you.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: “What is it?”

Chi Zichun began: “Earlier today, I saw Gu Ming and Fang Sheng behaving in a suspicious manner and the two men slipped out into the streets. I decided to stalk them and witnessed them conversing with Sa Li. I believe they are up to no good and I am worried that they are plotting something against you, Master Shen.”

Xiang Shaolong thought: I have my limitations and cannot cope with so many issues cropping up at the same time.

The best solution is to make another pair of ice skis and while the snow outside the city is waist deep, it is the perfect timing to ‘skate’ away. Even if all the soldiers of the six states were to jointly pursue him, it would still be fruitless.

This plan is indeed appealing but the problem lies with him being unable to convince himself. Moreover, Xie Ziyuan’s problem is unresolved and he can never leave with a peace of mind.

Patting Chi Zichun’s shoulder and dispatching some words of encouragement, he ambled towards the inner courtyard.

Chi Zichun instead caught up to him and pulled him to a corner before adding: “These is something more I need to tell Master Shen. Upon Gu Ming’s return, he went to look for Second Mistress. Following that, Second Mistress and Miss Xiuzhen left the Villa too.”

Xiang Shaolong was burning with rage. Up till today, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen don’t know what’s good for them and have remained in cahoots with Sa Li. To think he is still risking his life by staying behind for their sake.

Back at the inner residence, Xiao Yuetan is waiting for him in a small side hall in the same courtyard where his bedroom is located. He gleefully exclaimed: “Big Brother has fulfilled your request. Look!”

As he spoke, he produced a roll of parchment from his bosom and opened it up for Xiang Shaolong’s perusal. It was indeed a blueprint of Qixia College that Xiang Shaolong desired.

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “That’s fast.” Xiao Yuetan enlightened: “It took me four long hours to finish drawing it.”

Pointing to the city gate drawn on the right side of the map, he gushed: “This gate is named Beishou Gate and is situated at the west of Big City. It is also known as Qi gate and the college is beyond it. Qixia College is built near the river, increasing transportation conveniences. With the river flowing partially around it, the college becomes even more mesmerizing to look at and is among the top eight touring sites of Lin Zi. It is a must-see attraction.”

Scrutinizing the parchment map, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Qixia College is like a small city outside the city. It even has its own city wall and roads. If I were to abruptly barge in looking for my sabre, it would be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

Drawing attention to a cluster of magnificent buildings, Xiao Yuetan indicated: “This is Qixia Hall, serving as the assembly grounds for the college as well as the place where all ceremonies and prayers would be held. Your Hundred Battle Sabre is hanging on the south wall of the big hall.”

Xiang Shaolong was fiercely determined: “Tonight is the night I will get my sabre back.”

Xiao Yuetan was stunned: “This is not the best time, right? Why don’t Shaolong steal the sabre when you are about to leave Qi?” Xiang Shaolong swore: “After I steal the sabre tonight, I will leave Lin Zi first time tomorrow morning, saving Han Chuang and his conspirators plenty of headache and consideration.”

Xiao Yuetan was mystified: “The heavy snow has paralyzed all forms of transportation beyond Lin Zi City, how are you going to leave?”

Xiang Shaolong confidently assured: “I have my ways of travelling across heavy snow, otherwise, I would not have landed up here. Big Brother can put your mind at ease.”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: “It would be best if you can leave here immediately but didn’t you commit to assisting Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans?”

Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed: “That is purely my one-sided and naïve thinking. In fact, I am merely one of their pawns. Presently, I am feeling disheartened and will only make plans for myself.”

His words are filled with strong emotions. Right now, his only worry is Shan Rou. However, the internal strife of Qi is beyond his jurisdiction and he cannot help much even if he stays.

The minute he decides to leave the next morning, he can feel his entire body relaxing tremendously. Whatever that is about to happen is totally none of his business.

Since Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and the others are treating him like an idiot, why should he occupy himself with their affairs?

Xiao Yuetan supported: “I will prepare clothing and provisions for you at once. Tomorrow morning, I shall smuggle you out of the City.”

Suddenly recalling something, he frowned: “How are you going to steal your sabre tonight? Unless you have a special travel pass, nobody is going to open the city gates for you in the middle of the night.”

Slapping his forehead, Xiang Shaolong cursed: “I forgot the city gates would be closed.” He began to feel anxious as he can foresee snow accumulating on the walls of the city, causing them to be impossible to climb. But he continued brainstorming at the speed of light, rationalizing that if even Mount Everest can be scaled, what is a measly city wall? Inspired, he wondered: “Is there any way Elder Brother can get his hands on a dozen iron chisels?”

Seemingly understanding his intentions, Xiao Yuetan was pleased: “Tomorrow, I will buy them for you from the blacksmith along the neighbouring street! Do you need a hammer too?”

Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “Since I am going to steal, I might as well steal the hammer and chisels tonight. It would shield Elder Brother from any future implications too.”

Xiao Yuetan agreed: “Since you are planning on leaving, it is always better to leave earlier than later.” Reaching out and holding Xiang Shaolong’s hand, he hinted: “After Lu Buwei’s downfall, I may accompany you to the borderlands. I am really sick of the Central Plains.”

When Xiao Yuetan left, Xiang Shaolong retrieved Bloodwave and inspected the climbing equipment on his body. Upon completion, he is still feeling agitated so he concealed a dagger on each calf and had a short rest before

putting on his clothes and heading to the rear entrance of the Villa.

With heavy snow continuously landing from above, everybody within the Villa is keeping to his or her respective bedrooms.

When the rear entrance came into sight, Xiang Shaolong's senses suddenly picked up something and he hastily scrambled behind a large tree.

The rear entrance door sprung open and three silhouettes slipped in.

Borrowing whatever blurred illumination the faraway lanterns could offer, Xiang Shaolong recognised two of them to be Feng Fei and Little Ping'er. The third person is a tall and imposing man whose face remains hidden.

After a reluctant Feng Fei converse briefly with the man, he reminded in a deep voice: "You must not let your heart soften. This Shen Liang is only after your money and body."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken for he could pinpoint the voice to be that of Han Jie's.

There is a difference between knowing something and affirming something. All of a sudden, he is beginning to resent Feng Fei. Based on her intelligence, she could not tell that beyond Han Jie's handsome outlook, he is basically a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Feng Fei had wanted to say something but held herself back and sighed with a breath.

When Han Jie left, both owner and servant returned back to their building.

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong ran out in pursuit. In the dark alley, the carriage Han Jie was using to send Feng Fei home was about to drive off.

As the alley is narrow and slippery, the carriage is moving at a slow pace.

Xiang Shaolong darted over and scaled the back of the carriage, noiselessly landing on the roof and prostrating down.

He did not think about the purpose of this tactic and is just trying his luck. If the carriage is not heading towards his ideal direction, he can leave anytime he wants.

With this kind of weather, it is a perfect setting for crime.

## **Chapter 07**

### **The Sword Saint of Qixia**

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The carriage made a turn onto the highway and began picking speed.

Glancing around and trying to make sense of his surroundings, Xiang Shaolong concluded that the carriage is not moving in the direction of the Chancellor Residence where Lu Buwei is supposedly residing. 'Where is Han Jie heading to?' He wondered.

He initially wanted to make use of Han Jie's carriage to discreetly leave the Villa, avoiding the detection of spies who are keeping Tingsong Villa under surveillance. However, his curiosity is significantly aroused and he might as well enjoy his free ride and investigate further.

A long night looms ahead and there is more than sufficient time for him to execute his original grand scheme.

Pulling up his hood from his windbreaker, he was feeling at ease.

Ever since Xiao Yuetan's morning warning, the fear of betrayal by his buddies has formed an indistinguishable source of stress, making him bitter and despondent. The moment he vowed to leave with great determination, the horror has completely disappeared without a trace. His only concern is Shan Rou. If Xie Ziyuan turned out to be the loser in this conflict, based on Tian Dan's cruel methods, Shan Rou could face another calamity of clan

extermination. Regarding this, he is at his wit's end and can only look on helplessly.

As the carriage swerve left and right occasionally, it finally entered the highway leading to Xie Residence.

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Who is Han Jie rendezvousing?

The carriage came to a stop at the main gate of Zongsun Long's residence. The next second, a side door swung open as a tall and remarkable fellow dashed out and swiftly boarded the carriage.

Once again, the carriage began to move forward slowly.

Xiang Shaolong is incredibly puzzled. Han Jie came to Lin Zi along with Lu Buwei and should therefore align himself with Tian Dan, who is at loggerheads with Zongsun Long. Why did Han Jie meet up with someone from Zongsun Long's residence and is behaving furtively as if they are afraid of being spotted by someone.

Contemplating to this point, he would not hesitate any longer. Shifting to the edge of the carriage, he leaned over and placed his ear against the wall of the carriage and focused all his attention into eavesdropping.

A voice as deep as a bass instrument sounded from within the carriage: "Xuanhua pays his respects to Elder Martial Brother. I miss you a lot."

The man turned out to be the holder of the title: Lin Zi's number one

swordsman. It is Zongsun Long's capable son, Zongsun Xuanhua.

Han Jie's voice rang out: "You are much more awe-inspiring compared to before. I am sure you have made significant improvements in your sword skills."

After Zongsun Xuanhua gave a modest reply, he praised: "Elder Martial Brother is giving me too much credit. What is the situation in Xianyang now? I heard Elder Martial Brother is doing very well!"

Han Jie guffawed: "Lao Ai is in urgent need of talented men and is naturally hospitable towards me. However, this man is extremely narrow-minded and cannot accommodate others better than himself. He can never amount to anything great. On the other hand, Lu Buwei is indeed a hero who can see the big picture. If not for Xiang Shaolong, he would have gained absolute control of Qin."

Zongsun Xuanhua coldly grunted: "Is Xiang Shaolong's swordsmanship as formidable as what the rumours say?"

Han Jie sighed: "He is as unfathomable as a ghost. No one has ever comprehended what he is genuinely up to. You should have seen his Hundred Battle Sabre right! Who could imagine and create such a unique weapon that can both hack and slash?"

Zongsun Xuanhua agreed: "After esteemed teacher received the sabre from the Great King, he toyed with it for some time. Although he did not say anything, I can tell that he is moved. I rarely witness this expression on his

face over the past ten years.”

Han Jie warned: “Back to business. You should take precautions in case Tian Jian and Tian Dan form a partnership.”

On the carriage roof, Xiang Shaolong was immensely stunned; finally understanding why Xie Ziyuan is behaving like it is the end of the world. Expectedly, Zongsun Xuanhua sighed with a breath: “We already knew about this and never anticipated Tian Dan to use this trick. Does Elder Martial Brother have a good counterstrategy?”

Han Jie articulated: “Lu Buwei is the mastermind behind this scheme, using his connections to pull Tian Dan and Tian Jian to the same side of the fence. Aye! Ultimately, Tian Dan is the most powerful official of Qi. If he is willing to sacrifice Tian Sheng, it is with absolute certainty that Tian Jian would be the next King of Qi. This is unlike the past where the winner remains unpredictable. Thus, the circumstances are highly unfavourable for you and your allies.”

Zongsun Xuanhua was infuriated: “Both Father and myself have done so much for Tian Jian, how can he simply switch sides to rely on our nemesis?”

Han Jie sighed: “Power tussles within the Court are simply the way it is. From Tian Jian’s point of view, whoever that can assist him in becoming King is a useful official. Moreover... Aye! I do not know how to continue. Lu Buwei gave Tian Jian his assurance that as long as Tian Dan stays in power, Qin would never invade Qi and would even harass the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), permitting him to invade Yan without any reservations. You can see for

yourself how tempting the conditions are.”

Zongsun Xuanhua icily snorted: “Only a fool would be taken in by these lies. At the end of the day, this is just Qin’s strategy of: Befriending Afar; Conquering Near.”

The eavesdropping Xiang Shaolong is even more confused than before. Whose side is Han Jie on?

Han Jie suddenly suppressed his voice and speaks even softer than before. Xiang Shaolong could not catch a single word and was about to curse him when Zongsun Xuanhua dismissed: “This is preposterous. My father and Tian Dan cannot see eye to eye and would never reconcile. In addition, given Tian Dan’s unscrupulous reputation, it would be a matter of time before we become cannon fodder.”

Han Jie reasoned: “This is merely using their strategy to your advantage. Tian Jian has unwavering trust in Xie Ziyuan. If you can offer the same terms to Tian Jian, I guarantee Tian Jian would still lean towards your side.”

Up till this point, Xiang Shaolong has lost all interest in the conversation. He carefully and gingerly somersaulted off the carriage and vanished into the gloomy lanes.

Locating a shadowy and secluded corner along the west city wall, Xiang Shaolong tore off a part of his shirt and wrapped it around the head of the hammer. He incessantly hammered one chisel after another, one higher than the other, into the city wall, which had accumulated a large amount of snow.

He then began to step on the iron chisels and ascended the city wall just like mountain climbers.

To avoid the wind and snow, the patrolling soldiers have fortified themselves within a battlement. Using the grappling hook and ropes, Xiang Shaolong easily flipped himself out of the city and treaded on the snow towards Qixia College.

Despite the flying snowflakes and dim illumination of lanterns, he caught sight of the tall surrounding wall around the courtyard where Qixia College is situated. The college sits atop a small hill beyond the west gate and is formed by countless conjoined buildings, emitting an impressive sensation.

Currently, Xiang Shaolong is no longer concerned about Xie Ziyuan's fate in the power tussle for the throne of Qi. Since Xie Ziyuan is Tian Jian's most trusted subordinate, even if Tian Jian switched sides and relied on Tian Dan, Xie Ziyuan would retain his usefulness. The sacrificial lambs would be limited to Zongsun Long and First Prince Tian Sheng.

Once he obtained his Hundred Battle Sabre, he could instantly run as far away as he likes, filling him with infinite joy. With the aid of snow skis, he would be back in the warm comfort of his own home in Xianyang within thirty days. In this world, is there anything more delightful than this?

Utilizing the cover of snowy forest on the left of Qixia College, he slithered towards the east wall, fully displaying this forte of the Special Forces. As the wall is only a third as high as Lin Zi's city wall, he simply somersaulted over the college's outer wall.

Identifying the main cluster of buildings, Xiang Shaolong raised his alertness to a maximum as he snuck towards his goal.

From the lantern's glow, the corridors linking the various courtyards were void of pedestrians and noise. From afar, the sound of a flute and a zither is audible. It was a scene of tranquility.

The time is nearly eleven o'clock and most of the population should be fast asleep in bed, granting Xiang Shaolong much convenience.

Arriving at the garden of the main hall, he finally observed three men who are dressed in scholarly uniforms walking by. Promptly concealing himself behind a clump of trees, he did not anticipate the three men to suddenly halt and began admiring the snow. Stuck, Xiang Shaolong could neither advance nor retreat and was forced to listen to their exchange.

Out of the blue, one of the men started to ponder about 'Heaven'. He professed: "A ruler must first familiarize himself with Heaven. Not knowing the workings of Heaven and the laws of Nature, the ruler will be like scratching an itchy feet without taking off the shoe. Tutor Shen, what is your opinion on this?"

The man named Tutor Shen wondered: "Is Lecturer Lao feeling the effects of the relentless snowstorm and becoming pessimistic, thereby allowing these thoughts to arise?"

The third man laughed: "Nobody understands Lecturer Lao better than Tutor Shen but I would connect his present thinking to his recent research of Xun

Kuang's System of Heaven."

The camouflaged Xiang Shaolong is first hand experiencing for himself the culture of hollow discussion by Qixia scholars. He prayed they would leave as soon as possible.

Lecturer Lao solemnly explained: "This time round, Lecturer Chou is mistaken. I am in full disagreement with Xun Kuang's System of Heaven. Xun Kuang's Non Intervention is only good in theory but is non-executable. It is a wide departure from reality despite the wide topics that have been debated. Compared to Guan Zhong's Man King Heaven Earth, they are poles apart. The latter book relates a necessary and practical approach to recognizing the correlation between Heaven and Man."

Tutor Shen bellowed with laughter: "Lecturer Lao has stirred my interests! Come! Let us return to our rooms before cooking some wine and chatting into the night."

After the three men have wandered off, Xiang Shaolong thanked Heaven & Earth. Scooting out, he furtively made a wide detour around a frozen pond outside the main hall. Coming to a west facing window of the main hall, he pried open a window shutter and opened it slightly. Upon peeping in, he observed a tall, spacious and wide inner structure that could easily accommodate a hundred men. Towards the south wall, a portion of it stands an elevated platform that is usually reserved for prayers. Right above the stage is a giant signboard, which the four words 'Qixia Hall' were sculptured.

What left Xiang Shaolong the deepest impression were the craved flowers on

the beams situated at the top of the hall. Coupled with huge, red painted pillars, they give the hall an authoritative and formal ambience while appearing intimidating at the same time.

In this moment, the other doors and windows are securely fastened. The only source of light is two oil lamps positioned on the platform, bathing the main hall in dim red illumination and from bright to dark depending on the distance between lamps and the section of the hall.

Scanning the hall a few times, he finally pinpointed his Hundred Battle Sabre hanging high up in the middle of the East wall. If he tried jumping, he should be able to touch the end of the sabre.

Exhilarated, Xiang Shaolong crossed the window ledge and somersaulted into the hall, briskly walking towards the Hundred Battle Sabre.

The interior of the great hall is still void of noise and human but in his heart, Xiang Shaolong was instead experiencing an indescribable feeling, causing him extreme discomfort.

His hand wrapping around the hilt of Bloodwave, Xiang Shaolong stopped walking.

With an 'Eeek' sound, the door leading to the front portion began to swing open despite the lack of wind or action.

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. He was about to make a run for it but it is already too late.

What followed was a cold snigger as a man dressed in white arrogantly entered the hall. Every time his step lands on the ground, it would create a sound; seemingly playing a melody that resembles a death knoll. The bizarre thing is although he was not walking very quickly, Xiang Shaolong could sense that this man could intercept himself if he had tried to retreat through the window.

What was truly disheartening and frightening was: Although this man has yet to draw his sword, he is already emitting an overpowering and domineering aura, making Xiang Shaolong feel that he would lose without a doubt.

An encounter with such a fearsome swordsman is a first for Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong bravely turned around to meet his opponent face to face.

The man leisurely stopped about ten odd feet away from Xiang Shaolong. With charcoal black hair that laid spread over his wide and muscular shoulders, he possess a nose hooked like an eagle's beak and a pair of deep set, penetrating eyes, giving the impression that he is a man without mercy. Hanging by the side of his body, his two hands are longer than the average man and the skin of his face and hands are as white as snow. In terms of appearance and body built, it is something even Xiang Shaolong considers rare. He is even taller and ferocious looking than Guan Zhongxie, giving others a ruthless vibe.

His eyes are profound and unfathomable, glowing with focus and a sense of fearlessness, and felt like they never need to blink.

The sharp contrast of black hair and white skin portrays him to be like a Warrior Chief from Hell who has broken through the earth to enter the human realm.

Xiang Shaolong gasped with a surprise breath: “Cao Cuidao?”

The man assessed him swiftly and nodded: “That is right. I did not expect the sabre thief tonight when I just received news this very afternoon. Report your name. I wish to see who is it that has the guts to create trouble at my, Cao Cuidao’s, place.”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart sank all the way to the bottom.

Only two men, Han Chuang and Xiao Yuetan, know about his intention to commit theft. The latter obviously would not betray him. Only Han Chuang remains. Despite saving his life on multiple occasions, Han Chuang has resorted to using this despicable scheme of ‘Borrowing someone else’s knife’ to kill himself, causing Xiang Shaolong to feel depressed and hurt.

From the standpoint of the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), it would be excellent if Xiang Shaolong was killed by a Qi native. When Qin and Qi wage war on each other, the Three States will stand to benefit without paying any price.

Casting aside all desires to retrieve his sabre as well as all irrelevant thoughts, he fixated his attention on surviving this encounter. Once he composed his emotions, he drew Bloodwave out with a ‘Jiang!’ and hollered in a low voice: “Awaiting instructions from the Saint!”

He is aware he cannot get off the hook easily and a quick battle is the best way out. In the meantime, he will look for a window of opportunity to make a getaway. If more people are alerted and rushed over in assistance, he would not be able to escape even if he grew wings.

Cao Cuidao plainly state: "You have got guts. For the past ten years, nobody has dared to draw his sword in front of me. You have come with pure defiance as I have given strict orders, forbidding anyone to enter the great hall at night. I will personally deal with all offenders and you happened to be the first."

Witnessing that with his sword still sheathed, this man is already eyeing the world with contempt and behaved as if he is unstoppable, he dared not be complacent and shifted slightly forward and pointed his sword at him, generating his own fighting aura that can barely withstand the invisible pressure coming from his opponent. Only the best fighters are able to produce such an astounding effect.

His eyebrow twitched as Cao Cuidao revealed a small sign of surprise on his face. He demanded: "Show me what you have!"

How glad was Xiang Shaolong when he heard these words. Fighting against this widely acknowledged number one swordsman whose sword skills have attained a saintly level, he was actually filled with horror. Looking at his posture as if he need not use his sword, Xiang Shaolong cannot afford to hold back and unleashed Mozi's most powerful attack from the Three Killing Stances: Attacking while Defending. Coupled with his striding footwork, Bloodwave whizzed towards Cao Cuidao.

Xiang Shaolong could not think of another swordplay that was more suited for this kind of situation. Even if Cao Cuidao has three heads and six arms, this would be his first encounter with such an amazing sword style. No matter what, he would have to adopt a defensive position for a few moves before counterattacking. When that happens, he could use this advantage to run for his life.

With a 'Yi!' sound, the front of Cao Cuidao abruptly exploded into a mass of sword flashes.

Xiang Shaolong has never seen such a fast sword in his whole life. The moment he saw his opponent's hand move, the sword flashes instantly advanced towards himself. Not only is there no sign of a defensive position, it is a hardcore style of facing an attack head on with his own attack.

His mind processing at the speed of electricity, he concludes that beside a fast sword, his opponent's sword strength and sword skills are beyond comparison, achieving an amazing and fascinating level. Based on past formidable opponents such as Guan Zhongxie, Cao Cuidao's fighting ability is at least two levels higher up. Simply put, Xiang Shaolong is definitely not his match.

As the thoughts sink in, his fighting spirit decreased by half and he no longer possess the courage to attack forcefully, deciding to concentrate on defending instead. He swung his sword out.

DANG!

Using all his innate abilities, Xiang Shaolong shifted horizontally by three feet. Coupled with his footwork, he barely parried the incoming sword Cao Cuidao has sent flying towards his chest. He could instantly feel the strength of his opponent crushing down on him like a mountain and could not help but take half a step back.

Retrieving his sword and standing still, his eyes shone with delight as Cao Cuidao cheerfully laughed: “You actually managed to block an attack that I have launched with full strength. This is wonderful. It is hard to find a worthy opponent nowadays. If you can withstand another nine strokes from me, I will let you leave.”

Xiang Shaolong’s right hand is turning numb as he realized his opponent is born with the strength of an ox, easily surpassing his own. No wonder he has yet to meet with defeat.

Just by forcefully slashing with a sword, he could easily overwhelm most swordsmen. Moreover, he has trained to become an outstanding and invincible swordsman, inducing fear wherever he goes.

In front of this master swordsman, even though they are about the same height, Xiang Shaolong would somehow view himself as being the shorter one.

Don’t even talk about nine strokes of his sword. He would be glad if he could successfully block the next strike.

Xiang Shaolong knows that without confidence and hope, he would certainly

and regrettably meet his demise in this hall tonight. However, his opponent's stifling effect has never left the scene, giving him the sensation of futility as if his every effort would surely be thwarted. At his level of accomplishment, he is already undergoing such pressure. If it were a less skillful swordsman in his shoes, his heart and gall would have imploded, ending his life without the sword necessarily piercing his body.

Cao Cuidao is able to surpass all other swordsmen because his cultivation of the sword has reached a godly state.

Cao Cuidao coldly rumbled: "The second stroke!"

With a 'SWA!' sound, the opponent's long sword came slashing down.

Xiang Shaolong has gathered all his energy in preparation for this blow but this attack of Cao Cuidao has somewhat given him the allusion that it is unblockable.

This strike is neither a fast strike nor a slow strike. Cao Cuidao is in full control of the speed of the attack but Xiang Shaolong could inherently sense that Cao Cuidao is putting all his strength into this blow.

Logically, the more strength one puts into the attack, the faster the weapon would move and vice versa. However, Cao Cuidao's strike is neither fast nor slow but is able to create the perception that it carries his full strength behind it.

Xiang Shaolong is exceedingly depressed. What strongly bugged him was this

strange and unexplainable sword move and the conflicting speed. His conviction is beginning to waver and he could not fix the point where he wishes to parry the attack, causing tremendous anxiety. In all his duels and battles, this is the first time he felt so powerless despite his abilities.

His fear may consume him but the inbound sword needs to be parried nonetheless. Fortunately, his mental energy has always been steady. Notwithstanding this disadvantageous scenario, he is able to swiftly recollect his emotions and resumed his calm demeanor.

His intuition tells him if he were to step back, the opponent's sword would attack with the force of a bursting dam and death will be a likelihood.

Running out of choices, Xiang Shaolong adopted a horse stance and twirled his sword, trailing a crescent of sword brilliance before piercing towards Cao Cuidao's abdomen.

Theoretically, his attack is faster than Cao Cuidao's by a tiny bit. Therefore, unless Cao Cuidao increases his attacking speed, he would have to block Xiang Shaolong's blow instead. Otherwise, by the time Xiang Shaolong's sword impaled his abdomen, Cao Cuidao's sword would still be about six inches away from Xiang Shaolong's face.

As cool as ever, Cao Cuidao snorted once and twisted his wrist downwards, flawlessly and accurately chopping down on the sword tip of the advancing Bloodwave. It is as if Xiang Shaolong had purposely prepared the sword for him to chop down on.

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed. With a 'DING!' sound, the top section of Bloodwave, around an inch long, has been sliced off. With the vibrating hilt causing much pain to his hand, he has no choice but to take a step back.

Cao Cuidao let out a string of laughter. His sword stance becoming strong again, he roared: "The third stroke!" In a flash, his sword is about to reach Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Xiang Shaolong finally and thoroughly experienced the worldly sword skills of this world famous Grandmaster Swordsman. His sword skills are simply extraordinary and behind a seemingly ordinary move are countless hidden variations and tricks, which one can never expect or guard against.

For example, this is an ordinary attack but it would somehow give the impression that he has devoted every muscle in his body, all his feelings and spiritual energy concentrated into one single blow. As a result, even a plain move like this is filled with a devastating power that one cannot hope to resist against.

In the past, no matter what types of marvelous sword moves Xiang Shaolong encounters, he could easily launch a counterattack. On the contrary, confronted with Cao Cuidao's simple looking but complicated sword style, he felt as if his hands and legs are tied and could not put up a successful defence.

To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong was in the middle of taking the step back while Cao Cuidao's sword is fast approaching him like a lightning strike, causing him to be in a dilemma whether to step back or forward. From this

episode, it demonstrates Cao Cuidao's excellent grasp of timing.

Since the beginning of the duel, Xiang Shaolong has been encountering restrictions in all his sword moves. If this goes on, it would be a miracle if he did not end up dead.

Xiang Shaolong viciously gnashed his teeth and turned his body while attacking with his sword. He simultaneously kicked out from below at the speed of light, aiming at Cao Cuidao's right calf, which happened to be taking a forward stride.

Cao Cuidao bellowed in a low voice: "How dare you!"

Hacking his sword against Cao Cuidao's sword, Xiang Shaolong was surprised when he did not hear the sound of weapons clashing. It turned out that when both swords came into contact, Cao Cuidao displayed an uncanny move by twisting his sword around Xiang Shaolong's, forcing him to stumble forward with the same momentum and naturally negating his kick from below.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong knows he is in deep trouble. As the whistling of the sword rang out in the air, an ominous atmosphere descended on him from all directions, making him feel like he is caught in the middle of a tsunami.

In this life and death situation, Xiang Shaolong casted off every single notion about escaping away that has been occupying his mind. With regards to Cao Cuidao's aggressive sword stances, he treated them with emptiness and gathered all his vigor to launch a blow towards Cao Cuidao's head.

Under the present circumstances, he could only rely on the fastest speed and selecting the shortest route, forcing his opponent to parry this attack no matter what. Otherwise, even the powerful Cao Cuidao would end up in a scenario where both men would be severely injured.

Nevertheless, he has underestimated Cao Quidao once again.

Out of a sudden, he can feel a cold sensation emanating from an area near his left ribcage. Cao Cuidao's sword had stabbed his body before flipping upward, breaking his killing move.

Although the opponent's sword only penetrated about an inch into his flesh, Xiang Shaolong can feel fresh blood gushing out of the wound. If this loss of blood were to go on, it would not be long before he would lose the ability to fight. Cao Cuidao's sword is so quick that up till this point in time, he has yet to feel the pain from the injury.

Cao Cuidao laughed boisterously: "The fourth stroke!"

Rapidly formulating a plan, Xiang Shaolong pretended to collapse, discarding Bloodwave onto the ground and at the same time, staggered a few steps backwards.

Just as Cao Cuidao was still reeling with astonishment, Xiang Shaolong retreated to the spot below the Hundred Battle Sabre. He hurriedly leapt up, grabbing the end of the sabre sheathe, finally obtaining his beloved treasure weapon.

Cao Cuidao furiously thundered: “You are asking for death!” Conjuring a multitude of sword flashes with the sword in his hand, he darted forward with steady footwork, propelling another attack at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong drew out the sabre from its sheathe, something that he hasn’t done for quite some time. With his left hand clutching the sheathe and his right hand gripping the sabre, his confidence increased by several folds.

DANG!

Unanticipated by Cao Quidao, Xiang Shaolong vehemently parried his sword with the sheathe and with a wave of his wrist, SUA! SUA! SUA! He made three continuous chops at his opponent, resembling three lightning strikes. The chops were indomitable and overbearing to the max.

Cao Cuidao’s is vulnerable as this is the first time he is fighting against a sabre which forte lies in chopping moves. To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong is using the sheathe to block his sword and simultaneously counterattacking with the sabre.

Nevertheless, he did not exhibit the slightest display of fluster and for the first time, adopted a defensive position. Without taking a single step backwards, he resisted torrent after torrent of sabre chops.

The sound of clashing of the sword and the sabre rang out non-stop.

Xiang Shaolong senses that his opponent is like a fortress which cannot be conquered. Regardless of the angle he struck with his sabre, Cao Cuidao is

always able to negate his attack. This consciousness is beginning to weigh down on his mind, resulting in a form of stress. Nonetheless, being able to force him into a defensive position within a short space of time is something he can be proud of.

Letting out a long laugh, Xiang Shaolong delivered another earth smattering strike before retreating and calling out: “How many strokes is it now?”

Cao Cuidao halted in bewilderment, realizing that they have long exceeded the agreed ten strokes.

Picking up Bloodwave along the way, Xiang Shaolong made good his escape through the window.

## Chapter 08

### Edge Of Death

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After ten odd steps, both his legs softened and Xiang Shaolong collapsed in the snowy garden. The area around his sword wound was splattered with blood, soaking through his clothes. He is beginning to feel a heart wrenching pain.

His head spinning, he forced himself to get up. It could be due to his earlier overexertion or the substantial loss of blood. Either way, it is impossible for him to leave this place.

But if he chose to stay in this freezing weather, it would be a miracle if he did not end up as a stiff, frozen corpse tomorrow morning.

He could detect some voices from afar. It appears that the noise generated from their fight has cause some alarm among the College residents. However, nobody dared to investigate due to Cao Cuidao's strict orders!

Digging out his dagger, Xiang Shaolong tore off a section of his clothes and brought out the external wound medicine Xiao Yuetan had prepared for him to bring on his journey. After applying the medicine, he bandaged the wound and recomposed his emotions before getting back on his feet.

The voices he heard earlier have dissipated and are replaced by complete silence.

Discarding Bloodwave among a clump of tall grass, he tied Hundred Battle Sabre securely on his back. Enduring the heart throbbing pain, he limped towards the outlying area one step at a time.

Passing by several houses, Xiang Shaolong could not take it any longer and had to stop for a break. He thought to himself: It would be great to have a horse carriage right now. Regardless of where it is heading, he would not mind at all. In his current condition, skiing back to Xianyang is but a crazy dream.

Inspired, he quickly and furtively proceeded towards the square in the front courtyard.

It is the usual practice to leave the carriage body in the square after the horses have been led away. If he can sneak into an empty carriage box and last till tomorrow morning, he may be able to find a way to leave this place.

In a short while, he had made his way to the driveway leading to the square. All around him, most of the houses have extinguished their lanterns and are filled with darkness. Only two or three windows are still illuminated, likely belonging to students who are defying the cold to continue their studies.

Because of overexertion and loss of blood, Xiang Shaolong's body temperature is decreasing rapidly and he is shivering nonstop. Right now, even taking a single step is an arduous task for him.

Right at this second, the sound of carriage wheels rotating can be heard from behind.

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amazed. It is deep into the night. Who is riding a carriage and leaving the College at this hour? He hurriedly shied to a side.

The carriage came closer and closer. It turned out to be Han Jie's carriage and Xiang Shaolong could recognise the clothes of the driver.

Xiang Shaolong thanked the Heaven and Earth. As the carriage drove past him, he used his last ounce of energy to climb onto the carriage roof, allowing the carriage to deliver him back into the ancient city of Lin Zi.

After additional difficulties and hardships, he finally found his way back to Tingsong Villa. The moment he tumbled into bed, he was knocked out immediately. He pretty much laid there without moving an inch until midday when Xiao Yuetan roused him awake, wondering: "Why is your face so dreadful looking?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "After being pierced by Cao Cuidao's sword, who can maintain a healthy appearance?"

Xiao Yuetan was aghast: "What!"

Xiang Shaolong updated him about everything that happened last night before adding: "We are able to prove two things from this episode. Firstly, Feng Fei's lover is none other than Han Jie and secondly, Han Chuang has betrayed me."

Xiao Yuetan was upset: "Based on your current condition, you are not ready to travel."

Xiang Shaolong swore: "I will make a full recovery in three days time. By then, I can go as far as I wish and ignore everything at hand."

Xiao Yuetan advised: "I will spread the word that you have fallen ill. For the next three days, you should try to stay within the boundaries of Tingsong Villa. No matter what, it is safer here."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Let's hope so!"

After Xiao Yuetan's departure, Xiang Shaolong pretended to be asleep to avoid entertaining well-wishers.

Xiao Yuetan came over to change his dressing and medication when it was late in the afternoon. He whispered: "It is truly puzzling. There were simply no signs of excitement or news from Qixia College. It is as if nothing has happened last night. They should at least inform the public about the theft of Hundred Battle Sabre."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "From your understanding, would Cao Cuidao correctly deduce the thief he encountered last night was me, Xiang Shaolong?"

Slapping his thigh, Xiao Yuetan nodded: "Of course he would. Only someone familiar with the qualities of Hundred Battle Sabre is able to showcase the full abilities of the weapon. And only Xiang Shaolong has the potential to match Cao Cuidao in terms of swordsmanship."

He then frowned: "But if Cao Cuidao exposes your presence to the Qi Court,

future problems would only increase in complexity.”

Xiang Shaolong disparaged: “No matter what, I am going to leave soon. So it is no big deal. Most crucially, nobody dares to deal with me in an open and aboveboard manner. Even Han Chuang has to make use of someone else’s hand to take my life.” Recalling this matter, he could not help but sigh with a breath. Being betrayed by a good friend really hurts.

Comprehending his pain, Xiao Yuetan patted him, quizzing: “Did Li Yuan send anyone to ask about you?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Logically, since Li Yuan knows that I am looking for him, he should come over and visit me.”

After a short contemplation, Xiao Yuetan suggested: “Maybe he is feeling guilt-ridden and is too embarrassed to face you. Aye! Is Cao Cuidao really that good?”

Still retaining some horror from last night, Xiang Shaolong described: “His swordsmanship has exceeded all physical limits, surpassing the capabilities of human and entered a godly state. Against him, I am totally powerless and is basically a punching bag for him.”

Xiao Yuetan informed: “Do you know that when he duels with other challengers, most of them could not even stand properly. Without him making a move, they would have discarded their sword and admit defeat.”

Xiang Shaolong had a similar experience and he confessed: “I know how that

feels like.”

Xiao Yuetan analyzed: “If you were equipped with Hundred Battle Sabre at the start of the fight, what would be the outcome?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “The outcome would be my demise.”

Xiao Yuetan was surprised: “You are really a modest person and do not place too much emphasis on victory or defeat. From my point of view, the main reason he has the upper hand is because you just discovered that a good friend had betrayed you. Thus, your mind is too distracted to summon your full fighting spirit. Moreover, your mind is also clouded with thoughts of wanting to escape, resulting in you harnessing less than half of your full potential. In a different setting and equipped with Hundred Battle Sabre, I am certain you would be a worthy adversary to Cao Cuidao.”

Xiang Shaolong’s confidence has been shattered by Cao Cuidao the night before. He sighed: “Right now, I just want to run away as far as possible and never come back. In the past, regardless of how terrifying or perilous the situation is, death would never cross my mind. However, Cao Cuidao’s sword is like a weapon constantly reminding me about my fear of death. With such extraordinary sword skills, he is someone I both fear and admire.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed with a breath and changed the topic: “Has Feng Fei been here?”

Xiang Shaolong answered: “Almost everyone has been here except for her who has been keeping away from me. With regards to her, I have given up all

hopes.”

Learning that he was ‘awake’, Dong Shuzen came to visit. Xiao Yuetan took the opportunity to excuse himself.

Taking small steps, the beauty sashayed to his bedside and sat down. Reaching out with her hand and stroking his face, her eyes glowed with intense emotions as she soothingly asked: “Are you feeling better? Aye! You do not appear to be a feeble man. How did you suddenly fall sick?”

Xiang Shaolong wished he could interrogate her about her continuing liaison with the despicable cad Sa Li but eventually suppressed the urge. He weakly replied: “Regarding this, you have to seek the answer from Heaven.”

Dong Shuzen threw herself on his chest and began crying wretchedly.

Xiang Shaolong could feel her agony and stretched out his uninjured left hand, caressing her fragrant shoulder. In a loving and sympathetic tone, he consoled: “This is not the time to grieve. For your future, Second Mistress must learn to be strong.”

Dong Shuzen pitifully mourned: “All my hopes for the future can only be decided by men. Now that you are down with a strange illness, what should I do?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger stirring. He lamented: “I am not the only person you can rely on. Why is Second Mistress so distraught?”

Her petite frame trembled once before Dong Shuzhen straightened her back. With tear filled eyes, she questioned in a surprised tone: "What do you mean by that? Currently, Xiuzhen and I have placed all our hopes on you. We do not have other arrangements."

Xiang Shaolong was filled with disdain: "If this is true, why did you secretly communicate with Sa Li yesterday?"

Dong Shuzhen panicked: "That is a baseless allegation. If Xiuzhen or myself is still in cahoots with Sa Li, may we die a horrible death."

Scrutinizing her body language, Xiang Shaolong can tell that she is not putting on an act. Concurrently, he was enlightened about the fact that Chi Zichun is a follower of Sa Li. He had intentionally made these comments to frame the two ladies, Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen, and at the same time, he could gain the trust of Xiang Shaolong in preparation of laying another trap. He was nearly tricked.

However, another problematic issue has arisen. With the two ladies placing their faith in him and him alone, he can no longer leave without with a care in the world. Presently, he is barely able to fend for himself. How can he afford to extent his protection to them?

Tears began welling up in the pretty eyes of Dong Shuzhen and two large tears the size of a bean soon rolled down her face. She bitterly sighed: "Xiuzhen and I are now trusting you without any reservations, you..."

Xiang Shaolong used a finger to press on her full, red lips, breaking off her

sentence. He whispered: "Is there any way for you to notify Lord Longyang, asking him to come and see me."

Dong Shuzen nodded: "I understand. Shuzen will see to this straightaway and it will be accomplished without anyone's knowledge."

After Dong Shuzen left, the seemingly unperturbed Feng Fei finally came to visit him. For some reason, Xiang Shaolong can sense that her attitude is somewhat different from before. Her eyes appear to be hiding some sort of secret.

In her usual graceful and elegant fashion, she sat down by his side and stretched out her right hand to touch his forehead before gently speaking: "Fortunately, your fever is not very high. I heard Mister is attending to your healing. You should make a full recovery in a short while."

Relating her presence to Han Jie, Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: "My sincere thanks to Mistress for your concern. How is the ongoing rehearsal? The birthday banquet for the King of Qi is in five day's time."

Feng Fei bitterly wondered: "From your tone, it sounded like we are complete strangers. Since when did our relationship degenerate to such a state?"

In this instance, Xiang Shaolong noticed the side of her hair is a little messy, as if she cannot be bothered to groom herself. Raising his hand to arrange her hair, he enquired along the line: "Didn't Little Ping'er help to comb your hair and apply your makeup today?"

Feng Fei bitterly smiled: “After learning that such a healthy man like you has become unwell, she has lost focus in her duties.”

As she talked, Feng Fei naturally raised her pair of dainty hands to tidy her own hair.

Xiang Shaolong’s gaze firstly landed on her chest. Due to Feng Fei raising her arms, her curvy and protruding breasts are much more highlighted than before and Xiang Shaolong could trace their outline. Shifting his gaze upward, his attention was immediately captured by an exquisite silver ring on her slender finger. His heart was instantly filled with shock.

Feng Fei stopped arranging her hair and questioned with astonishment: “Why is your face so ghastly looking?”

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing a tsunami.

That silver ring, as he remembered correctly, was a secret killing weapon with a concealed poison needle. Back at Xianyang Drunken Wind Brothel when they first met, Feng Fei frankly admitted to him that someone has instructed her to use this ring to murder him, Xiang Shaolong. Eventually, she discarded the ring on the floor, demonstrating her abortion of the assassination plan. Presently, this dangerous ring has suddenly appeared on her lovely finger. Needless to say, it must be Han Jie egging her to kill himself in order to demonstrate her loyalty towards Han Jie. No wonder her bearing is so much different compared to before.

Of course Feng Fei did not know he has seen through her scam. She whined:

“Why are you not answering me?”

Suppressing his surging emotions, Xiang Shaolong is deeply troubled.

If Feng Fei tries to prick him with the poison needle in the ring, what should he do?

He naturally could not allow himself to be pricked but if he exposed her right now, it would be as good as telling her he is Xiang Shaolong. He was stuck in a dilemma.

While he was as dazed as a piece of wood, Feng Fei threw herself across his chest, grieving: “Why does Feng Fei have to meet a man like you under such circumstances?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is having an emotional outburst but his main concern is still centered around the killing weapon on her jade finger. Swiftly grabbing her ‘poisonous hand’ which is trying to hug him around the neck, he simultaneously distracted her: “Why would Mistress fall in love with a man who happens to be Lao Ai’s partner in crime?”

Guilt ridden, Feng Fei’s hourglass figure shuddered violently and as she sat upright, retracting her ‘poisonous hand’. Pretending to be angry, she furiously derided: “Can you stop making wild guesses? I do not know this Han Jie at all.”

Still occupying himself with the poisonous ring and anticipating an attack anytime, Xiang Shaolong tempted: “You are still trying to hide the truth from

me. Does Mistress wish to know who did Han Jie visit after sending you home last night?"

He was simply saying the first thing that came to his mind but as the words left his lips, he was shaken by a new realization.

Isn't Zongsun Long desperate to obtain Feng Fei for himself? Now that Han Jie is on close terms with his son, wouldn't it appear controversial?

Feng Fei made an 'Ah!' sound and turned speechless.

Xiang Shaolong began to calm down; knowing that she would not ambush him without first finding out who did Han Jie went to see. He cheekily smiled: "If Mistress continues to deny the truth, there is no point in discussing this any further."

Lowering her face, Feng Fei questioned in a low voice: "Who did he went to see?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "Zongsun Xuanhua."

Feng Fei gasped: "What?"

Reaching out and patting her face with his hand, Xiang Shaolong mumbled incoherently: "Mistress had better think carefully over it! I am dead tired and need a rest. Only in my dreams can I avoid this scheming and deceitful world that is filled with hatred and violence, and visit Paradise."

Feng Fei was taken aback: “What is Paradise?”

Xiang Shaolong began telling her the story from ‘Tales of Paradise’, authored by Tao Yanming. He altered the characters and the timing of the story according.

Out of the blue, Feng Fei’s face was all covered with tears and she cannot even speak properly from her crying. Leaping into his arms once again, she bemoaned: “What should I do?”

Xiang Shaolong honestly advocated: “Regarding this matter, patience and further observation is required. Although Han Jie did went to see Zongsun Xuanhua, it does not amount to anything yet. Will Mistress grant your servant some time to investigate further?”

Feng Fei shook her head: “At least he should tell me he is going to meet Zongsun Xuanhua!”

On behalf of all men, Xiang Shaolong apologized: “It is a habit of men to withhold knowledge of his activities from women.”

After some thought, Feng Fei slowly revealed: “If it were someone else, given the present circumstances, he would surely speak badly of Han Jie. Aye! Shen Liang ah! What kind of person are you?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Till now, you have no idea? I am an authentic, real life dummy, which nobody can deny. Despite knowing Mistress lying and plotting against me, I could not bear to see you crying and

in pain.”

Feng Fei sat upright and allowed Xiang Shaolong to wipe away her tears while maintaining a wooden expression.

Xiang Shaolong did not know what to say next. Luckily, Lord Longyang happened to come by and prevented an awkward scenario.

After Lord Longyang took over Feng Fei’s seat, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly remarked: “I nearly died at the hands of Han Chuang and I thought I will never see Your Lordship again.”

Lord Longyang was thunderstruck: “What do you mean?”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lord Longyang has ‘feelings’ for him and would be truthful. Therefore, he concluded that he is in the dark about this matter and told him about everything that happened last night.

His face continuously drained of colour, Lord Longyang contemplated for a short period of time before deciding: “The snowing has finally stopped. When the weather improves over the next two days, I will immediately escort you out of Lin Zi.”

Xiang Shaolong cautioned: “We must never do that; otherwise, Your Lordship would be found guilty of committing treason. Right now, I only want to find out if Han Chuang had informed Guo Kai about my affairs.”

Lord Longyang affirmed: “You can count on me. Now that you have

mentioned it, Han Chuang did verbally test my loyalty towards you. This \*\*\*\*\* is always saying one thing but doing another. How contemptible!”

Xiang Shaolong reassured: “I would not pin all the blame on him. I am sure he has resorted to this because he had no other choice. Based on our friendship, it is not difficult to guard against him but if he had informed Guo Kai, then the situation would be much more dangerous.”

Standing up, Lord Longyang swore: “I will launch my investigations immediately. All I need to do is to pretend to scheme against you in front of Han Chuang. I guarantee he will divulge all his plans.”

After Lord Longyang’s departure, Xiang Shaolong can feel his mood improving, aiding in his recovery and healing by more than half.

This time round, he made the correct bet.

Based on the friendship between Lord Longyang and himself, it would be challenging for Lord Longyang to plot against him for a second time.

In the midst of his thoughts, he unknowingly drifted into slumber. By the time he woke up again, it was already evening time.

Xie Ziyuan is here.

## **Chapter 09**

### **Enemies Are Bound To Meet On A Narrow Road**

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Settling down on a cushion beside Xiang Shaolong's bed, Xie Ziyuan scratched his head, wondering: "How did you end up in such a terrible state? Little Brother was thinking of asking you out for some fun."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: "Have you resolved your problem?"

Xie Ziyuan lamented: "Even if it cannot be solved, Little Brother is still required to compose a finale song for Lan Gongyuan. This time, I am in trouble and I am afraid the Great King would hold me responsible."

Feeling anxious for him, Xiang Shaolong panicked: "There are only five days left. What should we do? Can't you go on your own?"

Xie Ziyuan bitterly smiled: "Wifey only trusts you and you alone. If I do not bring you home for her approval, I would be stuck at home."

Xiang Shaolong suggested: "Why don't you say you are going over to Zongsun Long's place for an important discussion?"

Xie Ziyuan sighed: "Zongsun Xuanhua is terrified of her. She will know that I am lying by just simply questioning him."

Pushing his blanket aside and rising from his bed, Xiang Shaolong gave in:

“Then Little Brother has to put my health at risk and accompany you despite my illness.”

In actual fact, other than his face turning ashen white due to substantial loss of blood, Xiang Shaolong is not as bad as he looks. After half a night and a full day of rest, he has recovered his physical strength. All that remains is an occasional pain from his wound.

Arriving at Xie residence, Shan Rou was equally shocked at his appearance. Sending Xie Ziyuan away for an errand, she privately inquired: “What happened to you?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I was injured by your Master’s sword.”

Shan Rou was confounded: “What?”

In a brief manner, Xiang Shaolong highlighted the important points to her. Before Shan Rou could say anything in reply, Xie Ziyuan had returned and they are forced to change topics.

The minute they stepped outside Xie Residence, Xie Ziyuan seemed to transform into a rope-playing monkey. He enthusiastically gushed: “We are going over to Lan Gongyuan’s Jade Orchid Brothel tonight. That girl has expressed some interest in me.”

Compared to Shi Sufang and Feng Fei, Lan Gongyuan barely knows about himself so Xiang Shaolong nodded: “I shall follow Brother Xie’s arrangement.”

Xie Ziyuan joyfully chirped: “If I inform this Soft Boned Beauty we are there for the purpose of composing a new song, she would surely pay us a visit regardless of her busy schedule.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Do not forget we must be home by eleven o’clock. Otherwise, even the King of Qi cannot save you.”

Xie Ziyuan solemnly promised: “Whenever Little Brother visits the brothel, it is only to soak in the ambience of the red light district, evoking inspiration for my songs. I do not bear any ulterior motives and four hours is more than sufficient for me!”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “I see. In this case, I can put my mind at ease.”

Xie Ziyuan suddenly sighed with a breath and stared out of the carriage window at the pure white landscape formed after the snowfall.

Xiang Shaolong understandingly enquired: “Are you still bothered about work?”

Xie Ziyuan resentfully smiled: “I would be lying through my teeth if I say I am not bothered. I just met the Second Prince this morning. Aye! I should not tell you about my affairs.”

Following that, his spirits rose as he exclaimed: “We are here!”

Under a bevy of escorts at the front and back, the carriage drove into the compound of Lin Zi’s most famous Jade Orchid Brothel.

With great fanfare, both men were ushered into the brothel.

The sky is turning dark and the lamps are being lighted at this point in time. Jade Orchid Brothel is already filled with guests and the atmosphere is extremely lively.

The two men have been assigned to a luxuriously furnished lounge and the maids naturally provided excellent service. Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Why does everybody in the brothel seem to be familiar with and going all out to flatter Brother Xie?" Xie Ziyuan proudly explained: "You must not forget that it is compulsory to play Little Brother's compositions here. Moreover, I specially implored Zongsun Long to book this lounge for me last night. In Lin Zi, everyone has to give face to him."

At this instance, the supervisor of the brothel, Madam Orchid, entered the room. Smiling widely before uttering a word, she batted her eyelashes seductively and informed: "When Yuan Yuan knows Official Xie is coming to visit her, she is so excited she forgot about everything else. Right now, she is having a shower and applying makeup and will be here shortly. Does Official Xie or Master Shen wish to ask for another two ladies to add to the festivities?"

Although she is approaching middle age, her pleasant grooming, coupled with a good sense of fashion and on top of her well-maintained figure, Madam Orchid is still rather appealing to the eyes. With her mind-blowing eloquence, she exudes a captivating and wanton bearing, arousing excitement in men and provoking dirty thoughts. Scrutinizing her, Xiang Shaolong is full of praise for the Qi Lady. Regardless of their age, they truly

possess a unique character. Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi are two shining examples.

Taking in her praise, Xie Ziyuan was laughing with his mouth wide open. He swiftly decided: “No need! We came specially for Miss Yuan.”

Carrying a womanly fragrance, Madam Orchid came to Xie Ziyuan’s side, sitting between the two men. With half her body leaning onto Xie Ziyuan’s body, she placed her lips beside his ear and began whispering secretly.

Observing Xie Ziyuan’s intoxicated look, Xiang Shaolong easily deduce that Madam Orchid is sweet-talking him and is telling him things that are pleasing to the ears.

Following that, Xie Ziyuan and Madam Orchid suddenly burst out laughing simultaneously. Only then did she bother to shift her mesmerizing gaze to Xiang Shaolong. She cheerfully offered: “Tonight, Yuan Yuan shall accompany Official Xie. Does Master Shen want me to help you to select a good female companion?”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly rejected: “I am just accompanying Official Xie.”

Madam Orchid did not press on and coquettishly sashayed away.

As foretold, Xie Ziyuan indeed became highly invigorated. Producing a roll of parchment from his bosom, he ordered the maid to deliver some ink and brushes and began composing on the spot.

Xiang Shaolong dared not disturb him and half prone on a soft cushion,

pretending to be asleep. The two young and pretty maids are very attentive and well trained. Without any prompting, they started to massage the back and shoulders of the two men. Xiang Shaolong, on the other hand, gained a new insight. He is beginning to comprehend the importance of one's status.

Now that he is masquerading as Shen Liang, he is obviously at a different status level compared to Xiang Shaolong. In the past, wherever he went, he would, without a doubt, gain the attention of the crowd and end up as the centre of attraction. Presently, even Madam Orchid cannot be bothered with him.

In the midst of his thoughts, he actually fell asleep.

In a blurry state, he imagined hearing a soft, gentle as cotton singing of a lady. It was heavenly to his ears.

He could not make out the lyrics of the song but can relish the wonderful sweet sensation in between the words she spouted. He felt as if he is high up floating among the mists and clouds as the tune swayed continuously in a melancholic water ripple and yet feeling light and soothing as if it was a gentle breeze blowing across a grass field.

Xiang Shaolong thought that he was dreaming but when he opened his eyes, he discovered that Lan Gongyuan had arrived and was presently prostrated against Xie Ziyuan's back and lightly singing the song he newly composed.

On a table opposite him sat a sturdy and tall youth. Noticing Xiang Shaolong stirring from his slumber, he gestured a greeting before refocusing his

attention to Lan Gongyuan and Xie Ziyuan.

At the end of the song, the young man began clapping: “The song is exhilarating and Miss Yuan is a superb songstress. Xuanhua take my hat off the both of you!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, finally realizing the man in front of him is Zongsun Long’s son, Lin Zi’s famed swordsman Zongsun Xuanhua.

Leaning back into the bosom of Lan Gongyuan, Xie Ziyuan threw a side glance at Xiang Shaolong, cheerfully exclaiming: “Brother Shen is awake. Let’s drink. No one shall go home sober tonight.”

Her lovely eyes shifting to Xiang Shaolong, Lan Gongyuan’s eyes rotated two rounds before shifting back to Xie Ziyuan. She unyielding protested: “I hereby ban Official Xie from mentioning the word: Home. Allow me do my best to serve you tonight!”

Xie Ziyuan and Zongsun Xuanhua exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

Embarrassed, Xiang Shaolong sat upright and wondered: “How long did Little Brother slept?”

Zongsun Xuanhua laughed: “I have been here for two hours and Brother Shen has been asleep throughout my stay. If not for Miss Yuan’s delightful singing, Brother Shen may have continued dozing.”

Lan Gongyuan personally poured wine for all three men. With the presence

of the Soft Boned Beauty, the ambience of the room is much more lively as if Spring had arrived.

After three rounds of toasting, Lan Gongyuan leaned back into Xie Ziyuan's bosom. Witnessing their intimacy and Lan Gongyuan's clinging, any man would definitely feel jealous.

To Xie Ziyuan, Zongsun Xuanhua sighed: "A beauty paired with a talented gentleman. This is the first time Little Brother has seen Miss Yuan behaving so submissively! Little Brother has yet to experience Miss Yuan's tender loving care."

Xie Ziyuan is fully intoxicated like a flying immortal and his soul seemed to have left his body.

Inheriting his father's long and narrow face, Zongsun Xuanhua turned to Xiang Shaolong. His chilling eyes flashing, Zongsun Xuanhua insinuated: "Brother Shen's flying dagger skill has left a lasting impression on my father. Little Brother wonders if he has the good fortune to witness it with his own eyes."

Groaning to himself, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You would have to wait till Little Brother recover from my sickness." He then secretly laughed for he would have slipped away by then.

Zongsun Xuanhua nodded his head and replied with sarcasm: "Of course. Ha! Brother Shen is truly lucky to have befriended Official Xie."

Lan Gongyuan was stunned: “Flying Dagger Skill? Young Master Zongsun, can you stop beating around the bush?”

Xie Ziyuan laughed: “It is only a misunderstanding! Miss Yuan, this Brother Shen here is currently the Troupe Manager for Mistress Feng.”

Taken aback, Lan Gongyuan glanced towards Xiang Shaolong. Her eyes glowing with additional signs of contempt and arrogance, she acknowledged with a ‘Mm’ sound but did not pass any comment.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling extremely uncomfortable and was planning to use his illness as an excuse to leave early, Madam Orchid came into the lounge. Passionately sitting down beside Zongsun Xuanhua, she cajoled: “Your servant wishes to borrow Yuan Yuan for thirty minutes. I hope three masters can give me some leeway and don’t take it to heart.”

Lan Gongyuan wailed: “They may not mind but I do mind! But since Auntie Orchid takes such good care of Yuan Yuan, Yuan Yuan cannot bear to object so I will definitely oblige!”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong was full of praise. Every single one of these famous courtesans is an expert when it comes to eloquence and mind games. With the flawless coordination between the two of them, how can they voice any objections?

Zongsun Xuanhua is no pushover too. He plainly inquired: “Is it because of Brother Qi Yu?”

Madam Orchid giggled: “Young Master Zongsun has hit the jackpot. He is accompanied by the Qin heavyweight, Great Chancellor Lu.”

His eyes flashing with electricity and ice, Zongsun Xuanhua coldly snorted: “If we are talking about Qin heavyweight, the most befitting is Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei? Humph!”

Reacting emotionally, Lan Gongyuan sighed with a breath and stood up from Xie Ziyuan’s bosom. She gently swore: “I will just pay my respects and be back before you know it.”

Xie Ziyuan hurriedly stood up to send her off and winked at Xiang Shaolong, reassuring: “Miss Yuan need not hold it to heart. It is also time for me to go home.”

It is unclear if she is being genuine or just putting on a show when Lan Gongyuan stubbornly remonstrated: “No matter what, I will not let Young Master (XZY) leave. If this is the case, I will remain here.”

Turning to Madam Orchid, she questioned: “Who else is accompanying Imperial Uncle (Lu Buwei)?”

This time round, it is Xiang Shaolong who had a big shock. He quickly suggested: “It would not be nice if Miss Yuan refuses to pay your respects!”

Madam Orchid smiled: “After learning that Official Xie and Young Master Zongsun are here, Imperial Uncle is coming over to exchange greetings!” She left after finishing her sentence.

Without a moment's hesitation, Xiang Shaolong apologized: "Little Brother is feeling dizzy and my legs are giving way. Please excuse my early departure. My heartfelt thanks to all three of you for tonight's session."

Ignoring the strange looks from the three of them, Xiang Shaolong strode towards the door in huge steps. The instance he opened the door, he came face to face with Madam Orchid who is escorting a high-spirited Lu Buwei. Behind him are three men, namely Qi Yu, Dan Chu and Han Jie.

As the two men exchanged looks, Lu Buwei's giant frame shook excessively and he halted his footsteps in astonishment, unable to believe that he is staring at his old nemesis Xiang Shaolong.

Han Jie, Qi Yu and Dan Chu have yet to identify Xiang Shaolong. They stared at the two men with surprise.

An ignorant Madam Orchid giggled: "What a coincidence! I happened to run into Imperial Uncle and these fellow masters making their way over here."

Stuck in a dilemma, Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Forcing himself to face the music head on, he smiled and greeted: "Shen Liang pays his respects to Imperial Uncle."

With a complicated look flashing across his eyes, Lu Buwei swiftly resumed his demeanor and loudly chuckled: "Mister Shen resembles an old friend of Lu Buwei, giving me a fright."

Hearing the name Shen Liang, Han Jie's eyes blazed with a murderous aura.

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Lu Buwei has identified himself but has decided not to expose him. He retreated back into the lounge to avoid blocking the entrance. Out of the blue, he can feel his fighting spirits surging to new heights and casting aside all his reservations.

Frankly speaking, he is sick of always pretending to be someone else.

Lu Buwei took the lead to enter the room and everyone including Zongsun Xuanhua hastily stood up to pay their respects. A minute ago, Zongsun Xuanhua had indicated his disrespect for Lu Buwei but right now, he is behaving in an uptight manner. Thus, he was likely stifled by Lu Buwei's reputation and bearing.

Giving up the best seat in the lounge, Xie Ziyuan shifted to Xiang Shaolong's table. As there are only four tables in this room, Xiang Shaolong and Xie Ziyuan had to share a table. Observing Lan Gongyuan clinging onto Xie Ziyuan, Madam Orchid personally served Lu Buwei.

Squeezing between Xiang Shaolong and Xie Ziyuan, Lan Gongyuan suddenly leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and queried in a low voice: "Why is Master Shen still here?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "It would be considered rude if I were to leave now."

Lu Buwei firstly raised his cup to toast everyone and with his second cup, he faced Xiang Shaolong and professed: "Miss Feng is indeed lucky to have Brother Shen Liang managing the Troupe for her!"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Lu Buwei has seen through his ruse: Sabotaging his efforts to obtain Feng Fei from within the Song & Dance Troupe. Raising his cup in a return toast, he smiled: "It is nothing. Little Brother is just doing my best!"

Besides the two of them, everybody else was astounded. In terms of status, these two men are worlds apart but ever since Lu Buwei entered the room, all his attention seemed to be centered around Xiang Shaolong.

Qi Yu, Han Jie and Dan Chu's interaction with Xiang Shaolong is minimal and therefore, they are unable to pinpoint Xiang Shaolong as quickly and as efficiently compared to Lu Buwei. All three men are awfully confused; why is Lu Buwei behaving as if he knows this insignificant character and is placing so much emphasis on him?

Pouring wine for Lu Buwei, Madam Orchid enquired from the side: "Have Imperial Uncle and Mister Shen met before?"

His eyes shining with a deathly killing aura, Lu Buwei plainly state: "We know each other previously and it was truly unexpected to meet under such different circumstances."

Listening to the intense emotion in Lu Buwei's tone, the crowd can sense his 'high valuation' of this Shen Liang and began to reassess their previous judgment of him.

Fully aware that Lu Buwei's brain is filled with thoughts of how to get rid of himself, Xiang Shaolong's mind speedily churned a reply: "I did not expect to

meet so many old friends during my Lin Zi trip.”

Taking in his words, Lu Buwei was flabbergasted and sank into silence.

Xiang Shaolong obviously understood his predicament. Even if he is ten times braver, he would not dare to plot against him, a Great General of Qin. If Xiao Pan eventually learns that Lu Buwei did meet him here and subsequently, he, Xiang Shaolong was murdered, Lu Buwei can forget about disassociating himself with the crime.

The only way that Lu Buwei can carry out his nefarious plot is when nobody knows Shen Liang is actually Xiang Shaolong.

He would certainly not reveal this secret to anyone to prevent the news from leaking out, especially to Qi. It would be a disaster for Qi if they are found ‘guilty’ of harming Xiang Shaolong.

Zongsun Xuanhua is now treating Xiang Shaolong very differently from before. He tested: “I did not realize Brother Shen has such a wide network of friends all over the land. No wonder even Marquis Han and Lord Longyang are considered your acquaintances.”

From his comment, Xiang Shaolong instantly concluded that Zongsun Long has planted a spy within the Troupe. For all you know, it could be Sa Li’s gang.

Lu Buwei’s huge body frame shuddered lightly, appearing to realize that he has lost the opportunity to assassinate Xiang Shaolong. In fact, he even had

to resort to protecting him from harm. Otherwise, in the future, he could end up as a target of suspicion or be found guilty of Xiang Shaolong's death. He is at a great disadvantage.

Everybody was staring at Xiang Shaolong, unable to comprehend how did this newly appointed manager of Feng Fei's Song & Dance Troupe managed to gain the friendship and high regards from the heavyweights of various States.

Xiang Shaolong raised his cup and toasted: "It is all due to their kindness. Little Brother toasts every one of you."

Nobody could understand the meaning of his words and returned the toast with a puzzled expression

Only Lu Buwei realize that Xiang Shaolong is warning him not to act rashly. Finishing his drink, he officially proposed: "Is Brother Shen available over the next two days? Can we schedule a time to meet or I can personally pay you a visit?"

When the words left his mouth, everyone present was left with their mouths wide open with astonishment. What is going on? Based on Lu Buwei's status and his usual condescending attitude towards the world as well as his arrogant and self-serving behavior, why would he lower himself to pay a visit to this Shen Liang?

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Not meeting is better than meeting. Imperial Uncle, please reconsider."

Everyone's expression went from shock to speechless, guessing that the relationship between the two of them is not as simple as it meets the eye.

Even Madam Orchid who was pressing her bountiful breasts against Lu Buwei's arm forgot about everything and was sitting with her back straight.

From the side, Lan Gongyuan's captivating eyes stared unblinkingly at Xiang Shaolong, scanning him at a speed that is neither fast nor slow.

His eyes glowing with anger, Lu Buwei lowered his head and glared at the empty cup in his hand. He replied in a deep voice: "Shen Liang is truly Shen Liang. When I heard Mister Shen barging into Zongsun Residence all by himself, I should have guessed that it was this old acquaintance."

Zongsun Xuanhua immediately became uneasy and dryly coughed once.

Cursing inside, Xiang Shaolong knows that Lu Buwei is purposely revisiting the old enmity between himself and the Zongsun Family, even covertly hinting his fake identity to the others. The best outcome would logically be a famed swordsman like Zongsun Xuanhua issuing a challenge to Xiang Shaolong. If Xiang Shaolong perished in an open and fair duel, even Xiao Pan cannot hold Qi responsible. However, Lu Buwei cannot directly expose his true identity and intentionally constructed this confusing statement.

Right now, the lounge is so quiet you can hear a pin drop. From far, the sound of a flute and zither playing can be heard, adding to the awkward atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong simply articulated: “Regarding that incident, it was all due to Brother Zongsun’s esteemed father who showed great mercy, coupled with Chancellor Li putting in a good word for me. Otherwise, it would be impossible for Little Brother to be here drinking wine and listening to Miss Yuan’s heavenly singing.”

Hearing Xiang Shaolong’s modest words and giving praise to Zongsun Long, Zongsun Xuanhua’s stiff face became relaxed. Raising his cup, he respectfully clarified: “That... That was only a small misunderstanding!”

Xie Ziyuan finally had the chance to speak up. He laughed: “It is genuinely a small misunderstanding. Let’s drink up.”

Dan Chu and the others were all feeling doubtful and reluctantly raised their cups and drink the wine while remaining deep in thought. Lan Gongyuan poured wine for Xiang Shaolong first before pouring for the others. With Lan Gongyuan away from her seat and no more obstruction between the two of them, Xiang Shaolong moved to Xie Ziyuan’s side and whispered: “Do not forget about Sister in Law’s instructions.”

Stupefied, Xie Ziyuan exclaimed: “I beg everybody’s pardon. Little Brother needs to rush home now!”

## **Chapter 10**

### **No More Hiding**

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When Xiang Shaolong returned to Tingsong Villa, Chi Zichun who is bearing a malicious agenda welcomed him in front of the main courtyard: “Your servant has something to report to Manager.”

Feeling doubtful, Xiang Shaolong checked: “What is it?”

Peering to his left and right, Chi Zichun whispered: “Why don’t we proceed to the garden before we speak further? At the garden, it is less likely to be spotted by the others.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “It is so late; who would spot us?”

Behaving as if he has something serious to reveal, Chi Zichun disclosed: “Actually, I wanted to bring Manager to the garden to witness a rendezvous between two shameless individuals.”

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned and wondered if Dong Shuzen was lying earlier despite swearing that she is loyal only to himself. Suppressing his voice, he quizzed: “Is it Second Mistress?”

Chi Zichun nodded his head: “And Sa Li too. It is all due to me paying extra attention to the movement of Gu Ming and company, discovering that they have smuggled Sa Li into the Villa.”

His anger rising, Xiang Shaolong icily hissed: "Lead the way!"

A surge of delight flashed past Chi Zichun's face and was gone the next instance. He led Xiang Shaolong to a wide detour around the buildings, following a small path towards the rear garden.

Stepping into the garden, it was all quiet and serene. The moon is shining brightly high up in the sky and there were no signs of human activity.

Growing suspicious, Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Where are they?"

Pointing to a storage hut located far away in the corner of the rear courtyard, Chi Zichun warned: "Right there where we store our firewood. We must take precautions for Gu Ming or someone else could be stationed nearby to act as a lookout. Manager, please follow me!"

Without waiting for Xiang Shaolong's acknowledgement, Chi Zichun went around a bush of flowers that was planted on the left side of a pavilion within the rear garden. He is apparently trying to take a small path along the rear wall.

Xiang Shaolong can smell a rat. While it is not surprising if Dong Shuzen and Sa Li are still in cahoots but given the present circumstances, coupled with him voicing his misgivings about Sa Li and herself earlier today, it would be illogical for them to rendezvous under these constraints. As he thought further, an image of Chi Zichun's earlier delight surfaced in his brain. It is as if he cannot hide his exhilaration at successfully luring Xiang Shaolong into a trap.

Ten odd steps later, Chi Zichun noticed Xiang Shaolong still standing at the same spot and shooed: “Manager, come quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong gestured for him to come back and brought him to the back of a clump of small trees, explaining: “There is something I do not understand.”

Chi Zichun asked: “What is it?”

Pointing to something behind him, Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Who is that?”

As Chi Zichun turned around in astonishment, Xiang Shaolong grabbed him from behind and whisked out his dagger, pointing it at Chi Zichun’s throat. He bellowed in a chilling voice: “Why are you lying to me? I saw Second Mistress in her bedroom with my own eyes.”

Chi Zichun begged in a quivering voice: “Master Shen, please spare my life. Your servant is not aware that Second Mistress has returned to her room.”

From these words, Xiang Shaolong knows that Chi Zichun is in a state of panic and could not tell that Xiang Shaolong is simply fabricating a lie.

Using a merciless tone, Xiang Shaolong frostily interrogated: “Who is laying an ambush for me? If you dare to say you have no idea, I will instantly cut a section of your throat and let you slowly bleed till death.”

Chi Zichun is much more timid than what Xiang Shaolong expected. His entire

body trembling, he stammered: “Master Shen, please spare my life. It is Sa Li who forced me to do this.”

Recalling that Zongsun Xuanhua is extremely familiar with the Troupe affairs, he had a brainwave and demanded: “How many men did Zongsun Long send to assist Sa Li?”

By now, Chi Zichun is a broken man. He quavered: “So Master Shen knows about everything. Your servant recognizes his mistakes.”

Finally discovering the perpetuator behind Sa Li, Xiang Shaolong can feel his body loosening up. Without someone backing him up, Zhu Xiuzhen and Dong Shuzhen would not give a damn about Sa Li. In the same context, those bootlickers Gu Ming, Fu Yan, etc, would not obey his instructions.

If not for his injury, he would teach Sa Li and the other swordsmen a lesson they would never forget. But if he does not use this opportunity to punish them, it would be letting these despicable cads off too easily.

Pulling out Chi Zichun’s belt, Xiang Shaolong used it to tie him up securely. Tearing a portion off Chi Zichun’s shirt, he made it into a ball of cloth and stuffed his big mouth with it. He then snuck out and headed towards the firewood hut in a different direction.

Moving without detection and camouflaging his tracks is a daily routine he practices as a member of the Special Forces. He managed to arrive at the vicinity of the firewood hut and the enemies are none the wiser.

Surveying his surrounding, Xiang Shaolong observed that the two door panels facing the garden are slightly ajar. There were another two men laying in ambush on the roof and were armed with bows and arrows. If he had trotted down the path Chi Zichun had recommended, it would be a miracle if he did not end up with countless arrows sticking from his body. After more scrutiny, he discovered that there were men hiding in the trees as well. It is an accurate depiction of: Danger lurking at every corner.

Xiang Shaolong was amused and darted towards the back of the firewood hut. Using a dagger, he stealthily pried open a window at the back. Pushing the window marginally open, he stared into the hut.

In a short period of time, his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness within the firewood hut. Borrowing some light from the moon, he could barely make out two men hiding in ambush behind every window, ready and waiting in anticipation.

Sa Li's voice happened to sound out: "What is that dog slave Chi Zichun doing? Why is he hiding there with that bastard?"

Another man replied in a deep voice: "Something is not right."

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in the rest of the conversation. Concealing himself at a side, he lighted his fire stick and very quickly dashed to the side of the window, throwing the fire stick towards a pile of dry grass and whatnots.

Cries of help can be heard from within the hut and it was a state of mayhem.

The wooden doors are thrown open as several strongmen pathetically staggered out and began running towards the rear courtyard exit.

Xiang Shaolong leapt out from behind the hut and fiercely roared: “Where do you think you are going!”

Identifying Sa Li, his dagger left his hand.

Letting out a tragic howl, Sa Li crumbled to the ground with an injured calf.

The men on the trees were all jumping down and joining the men from the hut in making their swift escape via the rear exit.

Xiang Shaolong casually strolled over and came to Sa Li who is still lying flat on his face. Using his leg, Xiang Shaolong flipped his body over.

Sa Li wretchedly begged: “Don’t kill me!”

As the firewood hut dissolved into a huge ball of fire, it clearly illuminates Sa Li’s cowardly expression. It was as ugly as a toad.

Feng Fei blew her top and immediately fired all Troupe members who are in cahoots with Sa Li or are spying for him. Tying Sa Li securely like a giant mummy, Feng Fei is going to deliver him to the King of Qi tomorrow morning and demand justice to be served.

By the time Sa Li was escorted away, it is already past midnight. Feng Fei requested Xiang Shaolong to accompany her back to the main building.

When they are alone in the small sitting room of the upper floor, Feng Fei retorted with sarcasm: “I thought Manager Shen is so sick he was confined to his bed? In the blink of an eye, he had slipped out with Xie Ziyuan to have a good time and even showcased his mighty prowess in capturing a villain and delivering justice.”

Xiang Shaolong is completely drained of energy and is leaning against his chair. He simply remarked: “I saw your lover just now.”

With her back to him as Feng Fei glanced out of the window, she calmly replied: “From tonight onwards, Feng Fei no longer has a lover and will never have one in the future.”

Xiang Shaolong can detect the sensations of grief and pain in her tone. He sighed: “Aren’t you overreacting?”

Feng Fei shook her head and denied: “You would not understand. I did bring up Zongsun Long’s issue to him and implored him to intercede for me since he is the Elder Martial Brother of Zongsun Xuanhua but he flatly rejected me. At the same time, he swore to me he would never meet Zongsun Xuanhua privately. Aye!”

She melancholically added: “Feng Fei’s heart is dead and only wishes to find a secluded place and live the rest of my life in tranquility. I want nothing to do with all the fame and glamour.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “That is my ideal dream as well. I have grown sick of all the wars and revenge killings.”

Feng Fei turned her petite frame around and stared at him viciously, declaring: “Finally willing to tell the truth? Feng Fei already guessed you are such a man.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered and offered: “Whatever. If Mistress is agreeable to letting Second Mistress become your successor, I can guarantee that Mistress will realize your dream.”

Feng Fei challenged: “On what basis are you offering this guarantee?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Based on the three words: Xiang Shaolong. Is it sufficient?”

As Feng Fei’s fragrant body shuddered uncontrollably, her eyes are shining with utter disbelief. Bewildered, she gazed at Xiang Shaolong for a long long time before collapsing onto a chair, exclaiming: “You have got to be kidding me!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “If it is anyone but me, Little Brother would not be petrified upon seeing the poisonous ring when Mistress came to ask about my illness and was forced to reveal the secret meeting between Han Jie and Zongsun Xuanhua.”

With considerable embarrassment, Feng Fei lowered her head. Lost and confused, she muttered: “Feng Fei did not treat you kindly; why are you still helping me?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Mistress originally is not evil in nature. It is just

due to constant interaction with people who are harbouring evil designs on Mistress. Thus, you do not trust anyone easily!"

Feng Fei dejectedly wondered: "What should I do now?"

Xiang Shaolong highlighted: "Earlier tonight, Lu Buwei has learnt that Shen Liang is in fact Xiang Shaolong in disguise. Therefore, continuing this masquerade is not beneficial but harmful instead. Tomorrow, I might as well seek an audience with the King of Qi as Xiang Shaolong. By then, anyone who wishes to lay their hands on you would have to reconsider the consequences."

Feng Fei was taken aback: "Aren't you afraid of being assassinated?"

Xiang Shaolong boisterously laughed: "If anything were to happen to me here, Qi cannot claim ignorance. I have grown to detest a life of lies and deceit. Right now, I miss my home terribly and my only wish is to return home as soon as possible to reunite with my wives and son. If Mistress wishes to settle down in Qin, I can guarantee it will be done."

With hot tears flowing down her cheeks, Feng Fei softly grieved: "Feng Fei's heart is dead. I shall adhere to Great General's arrangements."

Before Xiang Shaolong could accumulate enough sleep the next morning, someone roused him from his slumber, saying that Zongsun Xuanhua is waiting for him in the main hall.

Recalling Sa Li's issue, he had a good grasp of the situation and proceeded to

the hall to meet Zongsun Xuanhua. As anticipated, after a round of pleasantries, Zongsun Xuanhua immediately went to straight to the point: “Little Brother has an inappropriate request and prayed that Brother Shen will grant this allowance to my Zongsun Family.”

Xiang Shaolong knows what he is up to. After observing Lu Buwei’s attitude towards himself last night, Zongsun Xuanhua is now having a better opinion of him. Moreover, Xie Ziyuan is a good friend of him as well and has decided to back down from the flying dagger issue. Now that Xiang Shaolong has a chance to do Zongsun Xuanhua a big favour, he smiled: “With Brother Zongsun’s words, I, Shen Liang, would never disagree. Sa Li will be handed over to Brother Zongsun and no further words are necessary.”

(meaning that there is no need to say thanks)

Zongsun Xuanhua did not expect Xiang Shaolong to be so easygoing and reached out with a hand of friendship: “Brother Shen is now my buddy.”

Stretching out his own hand to grab Zongsun Xuanhua’s hand, Xiang Shaolong affirmed: “Little Brother has always regarded Brother Zongsun as a friend.”

Before Zongsun Xuanhua could reply, Fei Chun barged in with a flustered expression and reported: “Qin’s Imperial Uncle Lu Buwei is here to look for Manager!”

Zongsun Xuanhua did not expect Lu Buwei to really come looking for Xiang Shaolong. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong had openly hinted he did not wish to

see him. Utterly shocked, he stared at Xiang Shaolong in a daze.

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong assured; “Brother Zongsun should have guessed that Shen Liang is just an alias of Little Brother. Let’s have a detailed discussion in the future!”

With skepticism written all over his face, Zongsun Xuanhua slipped out from the rear exit.

Lu Buwei’s grand arrival has every single troupe member buzzing with excitement. Except for Feng Fei who has seen it coming, the rest are still feeling puzzled.

The moment this world famous Qin Imperial Uncle stepped in, he requested to speak with Xiang Shaolong privately. Once everybody else has retreated from the hall, Lu Buwei let out a long sigh: “Shaolong is truly amazing to disguise yourself as Shen Liang and hide yourself in Lin Zi.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly questioned: “Have I caused Imperial Uncle a great deal of disappointment?”

His two eyes flashing a chilly aura, Lu Buwei stared at him and promised: “Shaolong, why are you speaking like this? The Crown Prince is worried sick over your survival. Now that I have ran into Shaolong, I will definitely do my best to protect and escort Shaolong back to Xianyang. I am here today to ask about your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “We shall discuss about it later. Now that I do not

have a valid reason to continue my disguise, I hope Imperial Uncle could officially notify the King of Qi about my presence and allow me to seek an audience with him.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Lu Buwei sighed again: “Why did our relationship degenerate to such a terrible state?”

Xiang Shaolong sarcastically replied: “It doesn’t seem like I am the correct person to blame.”

Lu Buwei conceded: “It is my fault and I only wish to know if there is a way to redeem our relationship. As long as we work hand in hand to assist Crown Prince Zheng, all the lands would eventually end up as Qin territory.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock.

He knows Lu Buwei’s character extremely well; a strong willed man who always rises to the occasion and would never admit defeat or his wrongdoings in any situation. For him to behave in such a submissive manner, it only indicates that he has gotten a trump card and is temporary making peace with himself.

What formidable scheme has he formulated?

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “From the beginning till the end, I, Xiang Shaolong, have always been a peace loving man and was forced by circumstances to retaliate. The differences between the two of us can no longer be resolved by just bare words.”

Putting on an earnest face, Lu Buwei clarified: “Imperial Uncle would not hold it against Shaolong for having such thoughts. Back then, Imperial Uncle had wanted to marry Niangrong to Shaolong, expressing my sincerity to repair the ties between us. That obstinate daughter refused to obey me and ruined my plan.”

Pausing, he glared at Xiang Shaolong and slowly avowed: “Right now, Imperial Uncle will inform the King of Qi about Shaolong’s presence. Shaolong, please give some thought about Imperial Uncle’s words. Even if Shaolong is unwilling to forgive me, Imperial Uncle has made up my mind to forget about all the disputes I have with Shaolong. Time shall be my witness.”

After Lu Buwei took his leave, Xiang Shaolong is still sitting in a daze.

He is one hundred percent certain that Lu Buwei has come up with a plan to kill himself, explaining his pretense at making amends. If he is unable to expose the murderous plot, he could incur a terrible defeat.

Even if he, Xiang Shaolong, is dead, as long as Xiao Pan is still alive, Lu Buwei cannot consider his victory to be a complete triumphant. Thinking about this point, his entire body suddenly broke out in cold sweat.

He believes he has discovered Lu Buwei’s trump card. It is the only but deadly loophole that can cause immediate and total devastation to Xiao Pan and him, Xiang Shaolong: The truth behind Xiao Pan’s birth.

Via Zhu Ji, Lao Ai could learn about the process and could also retrieve the address of the couple who had raised the ‘real Yingzheng’. After bringing the

couple back to Xianyang and spilling the beans, not only would Xiao Pan lose the throne, Xiang Shaolong himself would be found guilty of treason.

But looking at it from another direction, if this had indeed happened, Qin Shihuang would not have appeared in the records of history.

Despite guessing correctly about Lu Buwei's trump card, there is nothing he can do to stop it due to time constraints. He can only live according to fate and pray that history cannot be altered.

Although he is adopting this mindset, his heart is still filled with anxiety, causing him much irritation. He nearly wanted to beat his own chest and shout out loud to vent the frustration amassing in his heart.

At this juncture, Feng Fei came into the hall and gracefully sat down beside him. She suggested in a low voice: "Shall we make clear our intentions to Shuzen and the others?"

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his turbulent emotions and nodded in agreement.

After several trials and tribulations, the affairs plaguing the Song & Dance Troupe are more or less resolved. However, regarding his personal troubles, this is just the beginning. Presently, he has lost all interest to stay in Lin Zi and only wishes to return to Xianyang as early as possible and join hands with Xiao Pan to manage his 'Identity Crisis'. How long must he wait before he can enjoy days of peace?

## Chapter 11

### Meeting The King Of Qi

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With a serious expression, Xiao Yuetan is helping to restore Xiang Shaolong original appearance while the latter is weighed down by troubling thoughts, causing the tension in the room to be very heavy.

Finally noticing Xiao Yuetan's serious demeanor, Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: "What is bothering Elder Brother?"

Xiao Yuetan sighed with a breath: "I am only too familiar with Lu Buwei's methods. He would never allow you to return to Xianyang alive. The more pleasant his words are, the more brutal the methods he will employ."

Xiang Shaolong was instead worried about Xiao Pan's identity crisis, secretly blaming himself for being too slow to realize that the moment Lu Buwei and Lao Ai joined forces, this would be a loophole they would exploit sooner or later. To make it worse, he could not get other people to help out and get them involved in this matter.

Xiao Yuetan continued: "Given the current situation, it is difficult for me to lend a hand. On one side, we have Li Yuan, Han Chuang and Guo Kai who are scheming to get rid of you and on the other side, we have Lu Buwei and Tian Dan who wants to murder you. Your situation is a hundred times more perilous than before. If they can stage an accident, for example: a house collapsing or a ship sunk by huge waves and strong wind, it would be

impossible for Crown Prince to hold anyone responsible.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Lord Longyang, concluding that he could be the only person who can save him now. However, he did not understand why is he not back with any news yet? Logically, after he has tested Han Chuang, he should make his way back to give his report. Is there more than meets the eye? Contrary to his thoughts, he assured Xiao Yuetan: “At least I will be safe in Lin Zi because no one would dare to openly assassinate me.”

Xiao Yuetan reasoned: “That is hard to say. If Tian Dan arranged for someone to challenge you to a duel and kill you in the process, it would be an uphill task for Crown Prince Zheng to avenge you. How is your injury?”

Peering into the bronze mirror at his familiar and yet unfamiliar original appearance, Xiang Shaolong flexed his shoulder muscles and determined: “I should make a full recovery in a maximum of three days.”

Xiao Yuetan reminded: “It is no longer convenient for me to visit you on such a regular basis, for it may arouse Han Chuang’s suspicions. Aye. With these new developments, I am really worried.”

A subordinate came in at this time to report that Lord Longyang is here.

Receiving Lord Longyang in the East Hall and sharing with him the intention to end his masquerade, Lord Longyang was badly shocked and he professed in a troubled tone: “This has greatly complicated matters.”

Xiang Shaolong do not wish to expend further energy on this bothersome

issue and questioned him about Han Chuang's reaction. Lord Longyang firstly lowered his head and contemplated for a short while before raising his head and gazed at him, suggesting: "Is it possible that Cao Cuidao coincidentally happened to be there when you are about to steal your sabre?"

Xiang Shaolong resolutely shook his head and affirmed: "Impossible. He personally informed me that someone has tipped him off. What did Han Chuang say?"

With his eyes glowing with distress, Lord Longyang replied in a low voice: "I proceeded accordingly to the plan and suggested to Han Chuang about hatching a plot against you but received an earful from him instead. It seems like he was not the one who betrayed Shaolong. Could Shaolong have forgotten somebody else he may have revealed this matter to?"

Xiang Shaolong could only think of Xiao Yuetan and immediately strike out this possibility. He quizzed further: "Is it possible for Han Chuang to see through Your Lordship's ruse to test him?"

Lord Longyang attested: "I can feel that he is not putting on an act. We have been friends for so many years and it would be rather tough for him to successfully deceive me. This affair is indeed baffling."

Xiang Shaolong grew hopeful. If Li Yuan, Han Chuang and Lord Longyang are on the same side of the fence as him, it would be a walk in the park for him to arrive safely in Xianyang.

Lord Longyang reassured: "Shaolong need not fret. No matter what happens,

I will always been on your side. Why don't we make plans to leave tonight? Once we have reached Wei, I will have a way to send you back to Qin."

Xiang Shaolong was visibly tempted. He mused: "But what about Feng Fei and the others?"

Lord Longyang recommended: "If you can leave a letter to Han Chuang or Li Yuan, imploring him to watch over them on your behalf, I am sure they will follow your instructions despite whatever plans they already have in mind."

Xiang Shaolong is even more motivated than before and asked about the road conditions. Lord Longyang swore: "For the past two days, the weather has become significantly warmer and absent of snow. The river should have thawed by now. I will use an excuse to deploy a ship to send you off and I guarantee that even if someone wishes to pursue you after your departure, it will only be a futile attempt."

Firstly, Xiang Shaolong is desperate to go home and secondly, Lin Zi is not an ideal place to continue loitering. He ultimately agreed to Lord Longyang's offer and finalized the details of his escape tonight. At this point in time, Han Jie and Dan Chu arrived together and announced that it is time to enter the palace and meet the King of Qi.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is entering Small City from Big City as he headed north towards the palace on a carriage. Along the way, he observed that the buildings are much more imposing compared to the largely residential Big City.

Lined along both sides of the highway are enormous mansions of the rich and powerful or high-ranking officials, coupled with numerous state buildings, all radiating with a luxurious and grand aura, majestic and magnificently designed.

The two men Dan Chu and Han Jie are behaving very respectfully on the surface, courteous and accommodating. Dan Chu even provided a travel commentary and introduced the various sights and buildings along the way.

Arriving at the palace, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan came up together and welcomed him as per standard diplomatic courtesy.

Concluding the usual pleasantries, Tian Dan, who still retained his heroic air, let out a chuckle: “Regardless of Great General’s ally or enemy, everyone is full of admiration for Great General. The world would be a much more boring place without someone as earth shattering as Great General.”

Regaining his past grandeur, Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Life is but a game. Witnessing Chancellor Tian’s open mindedness, Shaolong should be the one expressing admiration.” At the same time, he observed that Tian Dan is already displaying signs of aging and vulnerability, a far cry from his young and valiant days.

Putting on an act of sincerity and intimacy, Lu Buwei suggested: “We are all old friends and since the Great King is anxious to speak to Shaolong, let’s talk further at the welcoming banquet Chancellor Tian will host for Shaolong.”

King Qi Xiang will be meeting Xiang Shaolong at the most outstanding

structure within the palace: Henggong Pavilion. It is also the same place where Feng Fei will be performing and the birthday banquet will be held three days later.

Henggong Pavilion is the most remarkable cluster of buildings within the royal grounds. It is situated at the northwest area of Small City and is only 800 feet away from the Small City west wall. It can be considered tall and overwhelming. The rectangular shaped pavilion measures 250 feet in length from south to north and about 200 feet in width from east to west. It stands at a height of about 50 feet and its brilliance is unimaginable. From the top of the pavilion, one could view the colossal parade square located between Henggong Pavilion and Golden Imperial Palace that could accommodate ten thousand soldiers executing their drills.

Henggong Pavilion itself is quite unique and resembles a pyramid with a flat top. There are two storeys at the tip of the pavilion and the three corners of east, west and north is inclined at a sharp angle while the south side is less steep. From the bottom to the top of the pavilion are one hundred stone steps and on the pavilion top, grey bricks are stacked in a certain manner to create a distinctive pattern. In the middle of the pavilion top is a squarish stage about 5 feet tall and the flooring of the stage is lined with mosaic tiles, exuding an impressive and elegant sensation.

The King of Qi is waiting at the lower deck of Henggong Pavilion, which is also known as Dianjiang Hall, to meet Xiang Shaolong. Accompanying him are First Prince Tian Sheng and Second Prince Tian Jian.

King Qi Xiang is around seventy years of age, short and overweight. With a

lethargic expression, he looks as if he will breathe his last anytime.

Both princes Tian Sheng and Tian Jian are of medium built and share limited resemblance. Despite their royal heritage, they are ordinary looking and do not possess the bearing of a King. If held in comparison, Tian Sheng has the typical playboy look who had overindulged in alcohol and women while Tian Jian is much more energetic looking.

The ambience is unexpectedly relaxing and friendly.

After paying their respects, Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei sat down in front of the King of Qi but at a lower level while Tian Sheng, Tian Jian and Tian Dan sat at the side.

Using his blurred eyesight to scrutinize and assess Xiang Shaolong, the King of Qi then began to laugh and articulate from his elevated throne: “In the past when Zhang Yi visited Chu as a guest, he attended a banquet where they are showcasing the national treasure of Chu, a jade disc. The jade disc was passed around and was abruptly stolen. Someone suspected Zhang Yi to be the culprit and gave him a beating. When Zhang Yi got home, he asked his wife if his tongue is still there. He declared that as long as he still has his tongue, there is nothing he would fear. Ha...”

Everyone laughed along in a flustered manner although they do not have a clue why he is sharing this story.

The King of Qi gladly added: “Based on his tongue (eloquence) which was not severed in the beating, he was made a marquis and eventually became the

Chancellor. Based on the sword in your hand, Great General Xiang was promoted to Great General. A tongue in the past, a sword in the present. Both have been used to achieve greatness.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is confronted with the weird imagination of the Qi populace. He responded: “The Great King has made an excellent comparison.”

Tian Sheng laughed: “However, Great General has switched to using the long dagger he created and has abandoned his sword.”

The King of Qi shot Tian Sheng a glare and countered with annoyance: “Are you hinting that I am ignorant? I have already sent someone to retrieve Great General’s precious weapon.”

This time round, it is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to feel extremely awkward. He opened his mouth and wanted to say something but did not know how to express himself. He cannot possibly reveal that he himself has already stolen his sabre and even received a stab from Cao Cuidao’s sword. Concurrently, he could see for himself the hostile relationship between the King of Qi and First Prince Tian Sheng. No wonder Tian Dan made a last minute turnaround and switched to Tian Jian instead. But judging from Tian Dan’s feeble appearance, he would not outlive King Qi Xiang for long.

King Qi Xiang is in the mood to chat and began talking nonstop: “Ever since the late King launched the campaign ‘Dominate Barbarians and Be their King’, we, Great Qi, bear the ambition to surround the world, living peacefully regardless of whether one is civilised or uncivilized. When Qin underwent

reform to introduce the rule of law, the two countries Qi and Qin have become the two large states with one in the east and one in the west. It is obvious that cooperation is mutually beneficial and estrangement will only bring about harm. This time round, with Imperial Uncle making a personal trip and Great General as a guest, it serves to reinforce the close ties between the two States. This is the best present I could ever ask for.”

Within the hall, every person has a different expression written on his face. Tian Sheng who had just been reprimanded by his King father kept his head low and was fearfully quiet. Tian Jian’s eyes are shining with passion as he stared at Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei may be laughing along but his body language is very unnatural. Tian Dan is still maintaining his deep and unfathomable outlook, possibly concealing a hidden agenda.

At this moment, a nearby official walked up to the throne. Kneeling down, he passed a letter to the King of Qi and whispered a few words to him.

Surprised at the words he heard, the King of Qi looked over to Xiang Shaolong and revealed: “Grandmaster Cao says he has already returned the precious weapon to Great General. He has also a letter here that he wishes me to pass it to Great General.”

Tian Dan was taken aback: “What is going on? Has Great General met up with Grandmaster Cao?”

Feeling exceedingly uncomfortable, Xiang Shaolong gingerly nodded his head.

The King of Qi got the inner official to pass the letter to Xiang Shaolong. After

opening and reading the letter, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Since Grandmaster Cao has a favourable opinion of Great General, he has invited Great General to Qixia College's Stargazing Pavilion on the day after the birthday banquet to exchange pointers. It is truly an honour for Great General."

While the faces of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei flashed quickly with delight, the King of Qi trembled excessively and his face turned ashen white.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly humoured. Three days later he would be safely in the territory of Wei; even if others jeer at him for being afraid of Cao Cuidao, he would not give a hoot.

There are only two men he dreaded meeting. One of them is Li Mu and the other one is the fear-inducing Cao Cuidao.

The minute Xiang Shaolong left Henggong Pavilion, he was intercepted by Xie Ziyuan. Dragging him to one side, Xie Ziyuan gasped: "Great General has deceived Little Brother thoroughly, so you..."

Firstly winking at Xie Ziyuan (to hint that it is inconvenient), Xiang Shaolong then paid his respects to Tian Dan and Lu Buwei: "Great General dare not bother the two of you any further and will leave the palace by myself!"

Tian Dan nodded: "Let's find some time to catch up over the new few days." Finishing, he left with Lu Buwei.

Scrutinizing Xiang Shaolong's chiseled features, Xie Ziyuan sighed: "Brother Xiang is indeed handsome looking and outstanding."

Shoulder to shoulder, the two men strolled out of the palace gate. Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Brother Xie is certainly well-informed.”

Xie Ziyuan proudly affirmed: “Nothing in the palace can escape my detection.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed: “In this case, are you aware that Cao Cuidao has just issued a challenge to Little Brother, fixing the duel at Qixia’s Stargazing Pavilion four days later? In addition, no one is allowed to witness the battle.”

His face losing colour, Xie Ziyuan was petrified: “What should we do? Aye, to think you can still smile at a time like this.”

Xiang Shaolong of course knows that he can still smile because he is going to slip away tonight and it would be a different outcome four days later. He consoled: “Worse to worse, I will just discard my sword and admit defeat. Will he still kill me after that?”

Xie Ziyuan was horrified: “Wouldn’t Yingzheng be upset if Brother Xiang really abandon the fight?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that he is representing the glory of Qin and forsaking the fight is certainly not an option. However, escaping for his life is a totally different perspective.

After all, anything is better than dying under the merciless blade of Cao Cuidao. Suppressing his voice, he assured: “Brother naturally has a way to resolve the problem. Brother Xie need not worry for me.”

Xie Ziyuan bitterly laughed: "I would be lying if I say I am not worried. Grandmaster Cao's sword skills have reached an immeasurable level and countless well-known master swordsmen are like children challenging adults when dueling him; they can barely defend themselves."

Xiang Shaolong deeply understood that sensation. Arriving at the carriage parking lot, an attendant pulled the carriage door open for the two men to board.

After they sat down, the horse carriage started to move.

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Where are we heading?"

Xie Ziyuan disclosed: "To see Zongsun Long. He wishes to apologise to Brother Xiang in person."

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong can feel his emotions stirring. Life has its ups and downs; human feelings have its warmth and coldness. What an apt description!

Ever since he has resumed his Xiang Shaolong persona, the entire environment seems to have changed. Within the Song & Dance Troupe, everyone is worshiping him like a deity and going all out to get into his good books.

On the other hand, as Shen Liang, he can witness the more genuine side of their characters.

Xie Ziyuan added: “Once the Zongsun father and son knows that you are Xiang Shaolong, they are exhilarated and quickly begged me to plead with Brother Xiang, inviting you to join hands with them to oppose Lu Buwei. With Brother Xiang on our side, the Second Prince may change his mind once again.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Can Brother Xie arrange for me to meet the Second Prince today? I am doing this not for the Zongsun father and son but for Brother Xie.”

Xie Ziyuan was visibly touched and decided: “Brother Xiang is a true friend indeed! I shall fix the appointment to be tonight!”

Looking at the streets through the window, Xiang Shaolong observed the people of Qi busy sweeping snow off the roads and property. The harsh winter is nearly over.

Contradicting their usual habits, Zongsun Long and his son are waiting for them at the door with overwhelming friendliness.

Xiang Shaolong has become their only savior.

To the people of Qi, there is nothing more critical than maintaining good relations with Qin. Only then can Qi occupy the lands of their nemesis Yan without any distractions and slowly expand their territory and eventually uniting the lands.

The reason why Tian Dan can wrest control of Tian Jian from the hands of

Zongsun Long is purely because he has Lu Buwei, this ace card.

If Xiang Shaolong who wields greater influence over Yingzheng compared to Lu Buwei decides to stand on Zongsun Long's side, Tian Jian need not switch sides to Tian Dan who had previously supported his own brother.

With this given circumstances, Zongsun Long is naturally treating Xiang Shaolong with utmost hospitality.

Seating themselves in the main hall, Zongsun Long firstly apologise to Xiang Shaolong. Before he could say anything more, Xiang Shaolong declared ahead of him: "Whether privately or officially, I, Xiang Shaolong, will do my best for Brother Xie and Master Long. There is no need for any pleasantries."

Zongsun Long father and son were deliriously happy.

Xie Ziyuan wondered: "Little Brother will enter the palace immediately and seek an audience with Second Prince to make the necessary arrangements for tonight's banquet. Where is a good place to hold it?"

Zongsun Long decided after a quick analysis: "Why don't we have it at Jade Orchid Brothel? Over there, the ambience is more relaxing"

Xie Ziyuan was ecstatic: "Yes. That is a very good place."

To Xiang Shaolong, Zongsun Xuanhua presented: "Xuanhua has specially selected a batch of top rated swordsmen and will assign them to Great General to use at your disposal. Their integrity and character are above

suspicion. While Great General is in Lin Zi, they will only take orders from Great General."

Xiang Shaolong thanked: "Brother Zongsun is really considerate. However, can this arrangement be postponed until tomorrow?" In his mind, he was thinking that he'll be long gone by tomorrow.

Zongsun Xuanhua respectfully consented: "We shall adhere to Great General's instructions."

He then frowned: "I heard my Master has issued a challenge to Great General. This is indeed troubling. Xuanhua will pay his respects to Master later and will try to persuade him to retract his challenge."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and dismissed: "There is no need to go to such an extent. Your Master's decision is something even your Great King is unable to influence. Moreover, Little Brother is interested to try out Grandmaster's Cao ultimate swordplay."

Zongsun Long anxiously stammered: "Grandmaster Cao may be a nice and approachable person but once his sword leaves its sheathe, he becomes a heartless fighter. If Great General happens to meet with some misfortune, that will... Aye!"

If he had not tasted Cao Cuidao's prowess before and someone like Zongsun Long is speaking as if he would surely lose, Xiang Shaolong would be greatly offended. Presently, he obviously would not react the same way. He laughed: "I have my ways of keeping myself safe. Master Long need not fret."

Zongsun Xuanhua had a brainwave and exclaimed: “Why don’t Martial Sister and myself visit Master together? He is most fond of Martial Sister and may make an exception, altering the duel to a friendly match just to exchange pointers.”

Xiang Shaolong has his own plans and smiled: “I really do not require any help from you. Brother Zongsun is a fellow swordsman and should understand how a swordsman think!”

Deflated, Zongsun Xuanhua nodded: “Great General is truly one of a kind. Master has lost interest in dueling a long time ago and only Great General is able to stir his fighting spirit. It must be partly due to Great General’s precious sabre.”

Zongsun Long reminded: “Brother Xiang is remarkably famous. In my opinion, I think Xuanhua had better warn the two troublemakers Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang. It would be hard to resist if they come forward and challenge Brother Xiang too.”

His eyes blazing with a chilling aura, Zongsun Xuanhua coldly grunted: “If they are thinking of dueling with Great General, they will have to contend with me, Zongsun Xuanhua, first.”

Since he is running away tonight, Xiang Shaolong leisurely proclaimed: “It is all right as I could use some practice with my sabre. Brother Zongsun is too kind.”

With a mixture of hero worship and admiration, Zongsun Xuanhua

respectfully and solemnly suggested: “Now wonder the whole of Xianyang is in awe of Great General. Just be simply observing Great General’s open mindedness and indomitable aura, one can deduce that Great General’s sabre skills have attained a godly state. Xuanhua can only admit defeat. Nevertheless, if there is an opportunity, Xuanhua hopes Great General can give Xuanhua some pointers.”

Xiang Shaolong exposed: “Brother Zongsun is really itching for a fight or is he trying to gauge Little Brother’s skills in order to decide to beg your Master to let me off or not?”

With Xiang Shaolong seeing through his ruse, Zongsun Xuanhua’s face turned red and he awkwardly insisted: “Great General must be kidding. Xuanhua is sincere in learning from Great General.”

Zongsun Long abruptly apologized: “I, Zongsun Long, would like to use this opportunity to bare my soul to Great General, hereby swearing that I no longer bear any ulterior motives towards Miss Feng Fei. If I break my word, may I, Zongsun Long, die in the wilderness with an exposed corpse. Will Great General please relay this message to her and tell Mistress I, Zongsun Long, is truly sorry.”

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and checked: “Little Brother may have to leave Lin Zi before Mistress. I may have to trouble Master Long to protect Mistress on Little Brother’s behalf.”

Thumping his chest, Zongsun Long swore: “You can count on me, Zongsun Long. Great General can put your mind at ease.”

The aggressor is now the protector. Life is indeed unpredictable.

Xie Ziyuan's body shuddered once and he recommended: "Why don't Brother Xiang find an excuse to return to Qin before the duel with Grandmaster Cao? That would solve everything without a hitch."

Zongsun Xuanhua was the first to praise: "You can lie that your Father in law is sick. With this justification, no one would blame Great General for missing the appointment."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong could not agree more and this scenario best depicts: Only a hero will recognize another hero. Pleased, he ended: "We shall decide further after discussing with Second Prince tonight."

Noting that he did not reject this idea, the other three men could finally calm down.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and bid farewell. Zongsun Long 'reluctantly' send him all the way to the main entrance before the other two men, Zongsun Xuanhua and Xie Ziyuan accompanied him back to Tingsong Villa.

## Chapter 12

### Dilemma

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Back at Tingsong Villa, Fei Chun came up to welcome him: “Reporting Master Xiang, the two men, Zhang Quan and Kun Shan have left.”

Xiang Shaolong has forgotten about these two men and was stunned upon hearing this news. He interrogated: “Did they take any luggage with them?”

His hands relaxed by the side, Fei Chun respectfully replied: “Their belongings took up two carriages. Mistress knows about it too.”

Secretly acknowledging that the cleanup is now completed, Xiang Shaolong is about to return to his room when Fei Chun awkwardly questioned: “Master Xiang, after the disbandment of the Song & Dance Troupe, can our band of brothers throw in our lot with you?”

Patting his shoulder, Xiang Shaolong advised: “The Song & Dance Troupe would not be disbanded. You guys should do your best and support Second Mistress. Touring the various States is much better than cooping yourself in one place.” Finishing his sentence, he began to climb the stairs leading to the main hall.

Fei Chun caught up to him and added: “First Mistress and Second Mistress are looking for you. And there is Miss Xinyue too. Oh, it nearly slipped my mind; Mister Tan is here as well and is waiting for Master Xiang in the East

Hall. He says it is a matter of life and death!”

Although he is now more popular than before, Xiang Shaolong is feeling more troublesome instead. He naturally went to look for Xiao Yuetan first.

Standing in front of the window, a dazed Xiao Yuetan was staring at the garden scenery beyond the window with his arms akimbo. Until Xiang Shaolong arrived at his back did he calmly divulge: “Shaolong, I have a piece of terrible news for you.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and enquired: “What terrible news?”

Xiao Yuetan described: “Today, I disguised myself and stalked Han Chuang. This ingrate actually went to visit Guo Kai in secret. They had a two hour discussion before he finally left.”

His heart swelling with a sour feeling, Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: I do not offend others; yet others try to offend me. What more can I say? This fella is getting better and better. Even Lord Longyang has been deceived by him. He cannot be bothered and replied: “It doesn’t matter anymore. I will be leaving tonight. Lord Longyang has arranged everything for me.”

Turning his body around, Xiao Yuetan used his hands and grabbed both of Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders. He seriously remarked: “How do you expect to leave? Both the river and roads have been blockaded by heavy snow. Lord Longyang and Han Chuang are in it together. Both of them are after your life!”

He continued: "The reason for my suspicion is because Lord Longyang came to visit Han Chuang. After a short discussion, Han Chuang then left to look for Guo Kai. What do you think they are up to?"

His face drained of colour, Xiang Shaolong stammered: "What?"

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "Shaolong, you are too trusting with your friends. You must understand that when the interests of the Country and the glory or shame, life or death of their entire clan is concerned, every strand of relationship will be cast aside. To the people of the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), the three words Xiang Shaolong is equivalent to their Soul Reaper. Only with your demise can they put their mind at ease."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head turning numb. If he does not leave, he would have to face Cao Cuidao's godly swordplay and handle other annoying issues.

He decided: "I will leave by myself."

Xiao Yuetan disagreed: "Your arm injury has yet to recover fully. Leaving now is too dangerous."

Pausing, he continued: "I heard Cao Cuidao has issued a challenge to you. Are you leaving and forsaking the duel?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "What else can I do? Elder Brother is well-informed indeed."

Xiao Yuatan warned: “It is not that I am well-informed but there is someone intentionally spreading this news, announcing this to the whole city and making it difficult for you to avoid this battle. Aye, did you ever think that if you had really slipped away, it would be significantly detrimental to yourself? Lu Buwei will definitely make a big hoo ha over this matter and damage your revered status among the Qin military.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “You are asking me to fight Cao Cuidao despite knowing that I will surely get killed?”

Xiao Yuetan reasoned: “Based on your current disposition, you will lose without a doubt. But since he personally issued the challenge, he must have regarded you as a worthy adversary.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “It could be Lu Buwei who ordered Han Jie to invite him to issue this challenge to me.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed: “You are saying this because you do not understand Cao Cuidao. There is no one in this world who can influence him. With a passion for sword fighting, he toured the land since he was young, looking for challengers to better himself. After the age of twenty five, he has yet to taste defeat and ultimately gained the admirable title of Sword Saint.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: “And you are still asking me to fight him?”

Xiao Yuetan officially articulated: “I am just being realistic. The population of Qin values the glory of its military and swordsmen. You can afford to lose but you cannot afford to run away from the duel. The impact on your reputation

is beyond imagination. Maybe you can persuade Cao Cuidao to limit the fight to ten strokes. That may perhaps create a win win scenario and both parties can maintain their personal standing without committing offence.”

Xiang Shaolong is highly enthusiastic and nodded: “Why don’t I make an official petition to the King of Qi. Of course I will be tactful about it and mention stuff like not wanting anybody to be hurt, etc.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Xiao Yuetan suggested: “Why don’t we write directly to Cao Cuidao? Since this old fella is unable to overcome you the last time, it must surely bug him and he may approve of this condition. Moreover, if nobody else knows about this arrangement and you manage to successfully deflect ten strokes from him, everyone would have the impression that you are evenly matched with Old Cao. This will enhance your reputation significantly without any side effects.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Cao Cuidao may have studied and understood his sabre moves and it will not be a repeat of their first encounter when he could only defend without attacking. He dejectedly mused: “These ten moves are not easy to defend against. Regardless of speed, strength or skill, I am inferior to him.”

Grabbing Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders and violently shaking him once, Xiao Yuetan fiercely painted: “Xiang Shaolong. Look at me. This is either make or break. If you persist in thinking that you will lose this duel, you can never return to Xianyang and see your wives and son. As long as you can walk down Qixia College Stargazing Pavilion three days later with your life intact, you can leave Lin Zi that very night, returning back to Qin for an ultimate showdown

with Lu Buwei. Otherwise, all your previous efforts would have come to naught.”

His whole body breaking out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong was shocked into awakening. His sharp eyes teeming with energy, he stared back at Xiao Yuetan and swore in a deep voice: “I got it. Xiang Shaolong would not let Brother Xiao down. I, Xiang Shaolong, will definitely return to Qin in one piece.”

Xiao Yuetan released his grip on him and concluded: “I will proceed to draft the letter in your room. Once you have signed it, I will personally deliver it to Cao Cuidao. After that, we can only pray for his gallantry.”

Xiang Shaolong made his way to the enormous garden of the rear courtyard. With the area swept clean of snow, Feng Fei and the others are conducting an outdoor rehearsal. Right now, Dong Shuzen is practicing the critical main song.

Now that he is better at assessing a woman’s artistic talents, he discovered that compared to Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen evokes a totally different aura.

Unlike Feng Fei sloppy and diva attitude, Dong Shuzen carries an exquisite and enchanting aura that reminds him of a poem or a work of art. Even when she is feeling upset or angry, she can still radiate an indescribable sensation of playfulness and passion. It is truly captivating.

As the courtesans are fully immersed in the performance, none of them noticed Xiang Shaolong stepping into the garden. Only Feng Fei approached

his side and whispered: “Once Shuzen finish singing this song, Great General will then announce Feng Fei’s retirement and her subsequent marriage into the Xiang Family. Shuzen shall officially succeed Feng Fei and be responsible for the performance at Qixia College.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “What?”

Chuckling with a ‘Pu Ci’, Feng Fei jested: “What is your what about? Didn’t you impersonate Shen Liang to seduce me?”

Xiang Shaolong realizes that she is just fooling around and changed the topic: “Did Han Jie look for you?”

Feng Fei shot him a look and replied in a slow and melancholic manner: “I was looking for you regarding this issue. He told me he went to see Zongsun Xuanhua because he wants to gather more information about Zongsun Long and my case. He even swore to Heaven & Earth that he would never let me down. I am so confused by his promises and I am at a loss now.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “As an outsider, it is impossible for me to intervene. However, Zongsun Long did swear that he no longer bears any malice towards you. He even guaranteed to safely escort you to wherever you wish to go.”

Her petite frame shivered once, as Feng Fei demanded: “From your tone, you sounded as if Lord Longyang and Han Chuang are both unreliable and at the same time, hinting me to give up Han Jie. What is going on?”

By now, the song has reached its highest peak and the environment was packed with a joyful and celebratory atmosphere like an energetic and dazzling display of fireworks. With the striking of the bell, the entire performance came to a stop instantaneously. However, the images of the spectacle continue to linger in one's memory.

Leading her fellow courtesans, Dong Shuzen came to the front of Xiang Shaolong and Feng Fei, bowing and paying their respects in their shrill voice.

Xiang Shaolong intensely felt that the bearing of the whole Song & Dance Troupe has improved tremendously, with every member working with a high fighting spirit and full of hope that the future is bright and can only get brighter.

If he had left tonight without saying goodbye, it would severely impact their morale. Thus, he can feel his own heroic sensation arising and matching their high morale.

His phobia towards Cao Cuidao has been cast to the back of his brain.

When Dong Shuzen stood up again, her eyes are filled with hot tears and glowing with utmost gratitude that no words can describe.

At this juncture, a subordinate came to report that Yan General Xu Yizhe is here to seek an audience with him.

Sighing to himself, Xiang Shaolong knows that another set of troubles await.

Xu Yizhe came to visit him in ordinary clothes and without any followers. His entourage is completely different from Lord Longyang and the others.

It has been years since they last met and the wrinkles on his face have increased considerably, signaling a tormenting lifestyle.

After exchange pleasantries, both men sat down according to their status as host and guest. This famed General of Yan lamented: “Today we may be pouring our hearts out to each other but tomorrow we could be meeting in the battlefield. This is truly dreadful.”

Xiang Shaolong can comprehend his emotions and enquired about Prince Dan’s situation.

Xu Yizhe sighed: “With wolves and tigers as neighbours, who can enjoy a day of peace? Great General should be aware of Qi’s ambitions towards our territory. This time round, we initially did not wish to send anyone over. However, Guo Kai kept egging Prince Dan, promising that if we can support Tian Jian and suppress Tian Dan, it will result in a different outcome. Thus, here I am. And I have discovered that regardless of whoever is in power, halting these ambitions is simply impossible.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. The people of Zhao and Yan are mired in gratitude and hatred themselves. In the same year when he took the time machine and travelled to this era, the Yan invading army has just been freshly defeated by Lian Po, who subsequently attacked all the way to the capital of Yan. At that time, Wei, Han, Qi and Chu joined hands in pressuring Zhao, forcing them to withdraw. Taking advantage of the situation, Qi invade Yan

and this time round, Chu came in to attack Qi from the back, as the Three States are unable to cope with Qi due to the fierce threat from mighty Qin.

The entire history of the Warring States is a record of large States conquering the smaller States. Every State has its expansionary policy and increased its own strength by absorbing territory from other States. If they do not increase their own strength, they would be conquered by others to be used to increase the strength of others. For example, if Yan is a bigger state than Qi, the people of Qi would be the ones feeling depressed now.

Ever since their crushing defeat at the hands of Zhao, Yan has been struggling at the brink of extinction. If not for Prince Dan who sent Jingke to assassinate Xiao Pan in the later years, probably nobody would have a deep impression of Yan.

Xu Yizhe added: “Prince Dan is currently based at Wu Yang, it is a developed city beside River Wu and it is nearer to the South border in preparation for any threats from Qi. If Great General can spare the time, Prince Dan would love to meet his old buddy.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Now, I am not even confident if I can make it safely back to Xianyang alive and would not burden myself with other matters.”

Xu Yizhe officially state: “Is Great General referring to the duel with Cao Cuidao? I am certain it is Tian Dan and Lu Buwei fanning the flames from behind. Great General must exercise caution when dealing with it. We did send a few top swordsmen to challenge Cao Cuidao, hoping to ruffle the

feathers of Qi. Unexpectedly, they could not even overcome Zongsun Xuanhua, causing us some distress.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that his present predicament is indirectly caused by Han Chuang. Not wishing to discuss any further, he changed the topic: “When is Brother Xu going back to Yan?”

Xu Yizhe answered: “I had planned to leave the next morning after the birthday banquet but right now, I would only leave after witnessing Great General triumph over Cao Cuidao.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Brother Xu is expecting too much from me.”

Xu Yizhe was slightly stunned and queried: “The match has not yet begun. Why is Great General already feeling disillusioned?”

Xiang Shaolong obviously could not tell him he had experienced Cao Cuidao’s prowess before and could only mutter some gibberish and changed the topic again.

After some idle chatter, Xu Yizhe finally brought up the topic that Xiang Shaolong feared most of all: “Besides paying my respects to Great General, Xu Yizhe has a special request.”

Xiang Shaolong could only respond: “Brother Xu, please speak without any reservations.”

Xu Yizhe solemnly explained: “Although we took part in the allied campaign

and attacked your State, we did so reluctantly and were in fact forced by circumstances. Otherwise, we would be helpless and alone the next time Qi attacks us. If we can get rid of this thorn in the flesh, I guarantee that my State will never participate in any allied campaigns.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “This is a high level decision. Can Brother Xu have the final say?”

Xu Yizhe sighed: “This is no longer regarding who has the final say but this is the dream of the key decision maker. Now that Tian Dan and Lu Buwei are in cahoots and the might of Qin military is suppressing the Three States (Han Zhao Wei), causing them to be unable to divert any resources to the north, giving Tian Dan the opportunity to occupy our territory. All I ask of is for Great General to hint Qi that Qin will not sit by and watch while Qi expand their borders. With that, even if Qi has all the guts in the world, they would not dare to be complacent. With just one sentence, Great General shall win the friendship of my State on behalf of your State.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong found himself in such a complicated dilemma. Although he could influence Xiao Pan, that is purely because he does not possess any selfish motives and is always thinking from Xiao Pan’s point of view.

Ever since Qin implemented Shang Yang’s reforms, they have a policy of befriending distant States while invading neighbouring States. For example, they maintained cordial relations with Qi and Chu while making inroads into the lands of the Three States. With regards to Yan, Yan did enjoy a glorious period when King Yan Zao constructed a Golden Pavilion to recruit famed

generals such as Le Yi who successfully repelled the Qi army. Presently, Qin cannot be bothered with pathetic Yan, which is situated in the desolated northeast. Therefore, Qin would never forsake their relationship with Qi for Yan.

From another angle, he has to make provisions for Shan Rou and assist Xie Ziyuan in regaining Tian Jian's cooperation. To a certain extent, he has to match the same promise Lu Buwei has committed to Tian Jian. The promise naturally involves Yan, this juicy piece of meat.

He knows better than anybody that he is not someone who is suitable for political work. Of course he could easily win the affections of Xu Yizhe by pretending to agree first and subsequently doing the opposite. However, this is something his conscience would never allow.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "It may appear easy for me to accept your proposition and just mention this one sentence; however, I am afraid it cannot be done."

His countenance slightly altered, Xu Yizhe admitted: "Then it must be my imperfect judgment, assuming that Great General is a true friend of Prince Dan."

Xiang Shaolong clarified: "Brother Xu is mistaken. Friends are friends. This fact would never change. The problem is that I am not officially visiting Qi on behalf of Qin and with Lu Buwei posing an obstruction, it would be challenging for me to put your message across. Therefore, I dare not recklessly agree. Can you give me some time to think this through?"

Sighing, he added: "If I succumbed under Cao Cuidao's sword, all my undertakings would be meaningless."

His expression turning warm, Xu Yizhe was slightly embarrassed: "It is me who had jumped to conclusions. We shall speak again after Great General return victoriously from Qixia College."

Xu Yizhe concluded his visit, standing up and bidding farewell. After sending him off at the Villa entrance, Li Yuan happened to come along.

In the past, Xiang Shaolong has the free time to take an afternoon nap. Presently, he is handling one appointment after another, working himself to death.

Firstly instructing Li Yuan to wait for him in the main hall, he proceeded to put his signature on the letter Xiao Yuetan had prepared. While he was rushing towards the main hall, Little Ping'er detained him, demanding: "Mistress is urgently looking for you and insists that you see her at once."

Witnessing the melancholic and pitiful glow of her eyes, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart grinding with agony. However, there is nothing he can do about it as he had made up his mind to refrain from taking another wife or concubine. Love is in fact the greatest burden of all. Since the passing of Princess Qian, the only women who have moved his heart are Qin Qing and Li Yanyan.

Xiang Shaolong was in a fix: "But Li Yuan is waiting for me in the main hall!"

Little Ping'er declared: "Nevertheless, you must visit Mistress first because Lady Qingxiu has sneaked into her bedroom."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong knows Lady Qingxiu and Feng Fei are acquainted. After weighing his options, he hurriedly made his way to meet this gorgeous lady.

As anticipated, Lady Qingxiu's face is covered with several layers of veil as she refuses to let Xiang Shaolong view her actual face. After Feng Fei knowingly excused herself, Lady Qingxiu went straight to the point: "Does Great General knows that you are in an extremely dangerous situation?"

Nodding, Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: "What updates does Your Lady have for me?"

Lady Qingxiu enlightened: "Chancellor Li naturally would not talk to me about his affairs. However, I did send someone to keep an eye on him. For the past two days, Han Chuang visited him several times and held secret discussions. Great General yourself is an observant man and should be aware that Han Chuang's character is deplorable. All along, Chancellor Li does not have a high opinion of Han Chuang. When they are suddenly behaving so intimately, I sense something is afoot. "

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "I understand. Thanks so much Your Lady. I am extremely grateful."

Lady Qingxiu simply state: "I am doing this for Yanyan; otherwise she would certainly blame me. We are just ordinary women and in our eyes, Great

General has done Chancellor Li a huge favour and Chancellor Li would be at fault if he repays your favour with evil. We do not care about other details. I dare not hold Great General back from your official work anymore. Great General, please help yourself.”

Xiang Shaolong is used to her icy demeanor, seemingly putting an enormous chasm between her and everybody else. He paid his respects and bade farewell before heading to meet Li Yuan.

Sitting alone in the main hall, Li Yuan was sipping his tea in silence. Wearing a look of anguish, it may be due to the fact that he is betraying Xiang Shaolong, causing his mind to be turbulent.

Settling down by his side, Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger rising. He coldly hissed: “I shall have to trouble Brother Li to inform your best friend that I have decided not to leave tonight.”

Li Yuan shuddered forcefully: “Is Brother Xiang leaving tonight?”

Observing his body language, Xiang Shaolong deduced that he is not putting on an act. Mystified, he wondered: “Didn’t that ingrate Han Chuang tell you about it?”

Li Yuan swore to heaven that he was wronged: “I really do not know about this matter. I came to look for you today because I wanted to tell you that the fella Han Chuang has convinced Guo Kai to get rid of you and frame Lu Buwei for it, causing internal strife within Qin. Hey? Are you assuming that I am in the same league as him? If I really stoop so low, can I, Li Yuan, be

considered a human being? Yanyan will hate me for life.”

His thoughts jumbling up, Xiang Shaolong can no longer discern who is a friend or foe. He disputed: “Why didn’t you visit me over the past two days? If I had tried to leave tonight, wouldn’t I be falling into Han Chuang’s and Guo Kai’s trap?”

Li Yuan was guilt-ridden: “Han Chuang did approach me consistently over the past few days. I did intend to stay out their affairs but eventually, I could not answer to my conscience any more. Shaolong, please do not blame me. It is Little Brother who is lacking in willpower.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Did it ever cross your minds that as long as I am alive and confining Lu Buwei in a power tussle, it would be unlikely for Qin to attack your States with its full potential. I am certain all of you can imagine what would be the alternative if I am not around.”

He could not help but recall Xiao Pan’s identity crisis again. This event would cause both him and Xiao Pan to be at a severe disadvantage. Even if Lord Changping and the others continue to express their support for Xiao Pan, he would have lost the legal and moral right to rule.

Li Yuan bitterly smiled: “Essentially, Lord Longyang could not bear to betray Shaolong too. Due to a moment of carelessness, he did mention to Han Chuang he once saw you in Daliang. After the incident, he did not make a report to Wei. Thus, he was blackmailed by Han Chuang into cooperating with him because this information could lead to the annihilation of his clan. His affections towards you is deeper than any one of us and he is naturally

experiencing the most agony. Brother Xiang should understand what I meant.”

Xiang Shaolong was incensed: “This fella Han Chuang has gone overboard. On the surface, he is spouting all kinds of friendship and integrity quotes. No wonder he has a special fear of me; his conscience is overpowered by guilt. Aye, since he could feel pangs of guilt, that means his personality is not completely evil.”

Li Yuan bitterly smiled: “I cannot imagine that Brother Xiang is still in the mood to joke. Han Chuang is indeed exceedingly troubled. Part of the reason behind his actions is due to pressure from Guo Kai. The loophole is that someone from Han Chuang’s entourage is a spy of Guo Kai, causing this information to be leaked out. Currently, Han cannot afford to offend Zhao and Han Chuang himself is terrified of Han Jing. If she lodges a complaint against him to the King of Han, he would be in hot soup.”

His anger faintly subsiding, Xiang Shaolong chuckled: “If I had knew about this earlier, I should have killed Guo Kai when I had the chance. It will save me from facing all these problems.”

Li Yuan reminded: “Even if it was somebody else, there would be no difference because in order to survive, men have been known to use all forms of despicable methods. However, this is simply against my conscience. In my opinion, even without your intervention, Han Chuang would terminate his scheme to escort you out of Lin Zi tonight. Using Cao Cuidao’s sword to get rid of you is surely better than getting his own hands dirty.”

From this sentence, Xiang Shaolong is confident that Li Yuan did not participate in this scheme; otherwise, he would be aware that Lord Longyang was the one escorting him away. On the surface, Han Chuang is supposed to be ignorant about this arrangement.

His mood improving, Xiang Shaolong perceived: "In this case, I should be safe before my duel with Cao Cuidao."

Li Yuan sighed: "Logically, that is correct. However, I am concerned that the idle swordsmen of Lin Zi may be eager to challenge you and assess your swordsmanship beforehand."

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: "I am in a terrible mood right now; they had better not mess around with me."

Li Yuan wondered after some contemplation: "Cao Cuidao is truly a brilliant and exceptional swordsman. There has never been a swordsman as skillful as him. Does Shaolong have the confidence to defeat him?"

Recalling Xiao Yuetan's 'Ten Strokes' proposal, Xiang Shaolong immediately felt better and nodded: "I should have no difficulty in defending myself."

Li Yuan was amazed at his reply and did not probe further. Just as he was about to continue the conversation, Xie Ziyuan came looking for Xiang Shaolong. Knowing that it is inconvenient for him to stick around, Li Yuan swiftly left.

As Xiang Shaolong welcomed Xie Ziyuan into the hall, the latter bitterly

laughed: “The appointment is fixed. However, Little Brother is facing a new setback. My wifey does not believe that we are going out together tonight and must witness your presence before she will give her approval.”

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that Shan Rou is only making up an excuse to see him. He bitterly smiled: “This time round, I shall fetch Brother Xie at your residence.”

Xie Ziyuan was elated: “Brother Xiang is a true friend indeed. When Second Prince knows that he is finally meeting you, he was overwhelmed with happiness. He states that in front of Yingzheng, a word from you is way more effective than ten words from Lu Buwei.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly felt that the eventual demise of Qi is precisely due to this kind of mindset.

Xie Ziyuan fantasized: “Once again, we must get Soft Boned Beauty to accompany us tonight. It is an incredible sensation to feel her leaning onto my body.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed: “Isn’t she working for Tian Dan? It would be inappropriate for her to overhear our conversation!”

Xie Ziyuan assured: “You can put your mind at ease. She is famous for not meddling in political affairs. Moreover, our discussion is not fully confidential. We mainly need to make it clear to the Second Prince that you are on our side.”

Recalling the incident this morning when the King of Qi scolded the First Prince Tian Sheng without mincing his words, he could comprehend why everybody is having a better opinion of Tian Jian and his higher chances at the throne.

Suppressing his voice, Xie Ziyuan clandestinely revealed: “It is rumoured that the Great King will announce the Crown Prince succeeding his throne during the birthday banquet. It will unquestionably be Second Prince. As a result, we need to borrow Brother Xiang to ruffle the feathers of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei.”

In his wildest dream, Xiang Shaolong could not imagine pitting himself against Lu Buwei and Tian Dan in this political struggle. It clearly demonstrates that political battles can kill without shedding blood.

From being an ‘insignificant’ being, he is now a Qin political heavyweight and can even influence the political outcome of other States. Life is truly beyond anticipation.

After informing him the appointed time, Xie Ziyuan speedily left to update Zongsun Long father and son.

Retrieving the Hundred Battle Sabre which he had securely hidden in his room, Xiang Shaolong hung it around his waist. In his mind, he decided that in the event that Cao Cuidao refuses to accept the ten-stroke proposal, he would immediately flee with Feng Fei once the festivities of the birthday banquet have been completed. Staying alive is of utmost importance. The swordsman’s glory is only secondary.

Reminiscing Cao Cuidao's amazing swordplay, all his fighting spirit drummed up earlier by Xiao Yuetan disappeared without a trace.

But if Old Cao is willing to accept the ten-stroke limit, he does not mind giving it a go. No matter how inferior he is, he can surely defend against ten moves.

He obviously understood that Xiao Yuetan is thinking from his point of view. Fleeing from a duel will leave a huge blemish on his celebrated life as a warrior. It is considered an unwise move, especially during this period when Xiao Pan is undergoing an identity calamity.

Nevertheless, no one understands him better than himself. Cao Cuidao's sword cannot be defended with pure strength alone. Dying in such a manner is not worthwhile, causing him to think of ways to avoid the fight. In addition, he cannot afford to leave his wives and child behind.

Until now, he is still unsure if Lord Longyang has betrayed him or not. The truth will come to light depending on whether he will cancel the arrangement to leave Lin Zi tonight or not.

He felt inclined to practice his sabre moves in the garden but on hindsight, if Old Cao is unwilling to accept the ten-strokes suggestion, all his practice would be meaningless. Absorbed in his thoughts, a fragrant smelling Xinyue suddenly squeezed herself into his arms and embraced him tightly. She faintly panted: "Great General has thoroughly deceived us!"

Hugging her enticing, curvaceous body and facing her attractive features, Xiang Shaolong is speedily losing his self control. However, he does not wish

to hurt her feelings and could only quiz: “Doesn’t Miss Xinyue need to participate in the rehearsal?”

End of Book 23